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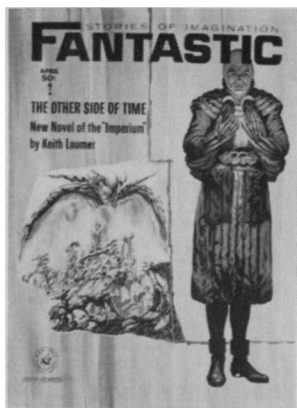
A New Novelet of the Star Kings:

THE SHORES OF INFINITY, by Edmond Hamilton

Science-Fiction Views of God

With a Profile of C.S. Lewis





in April **FANTASTIC**
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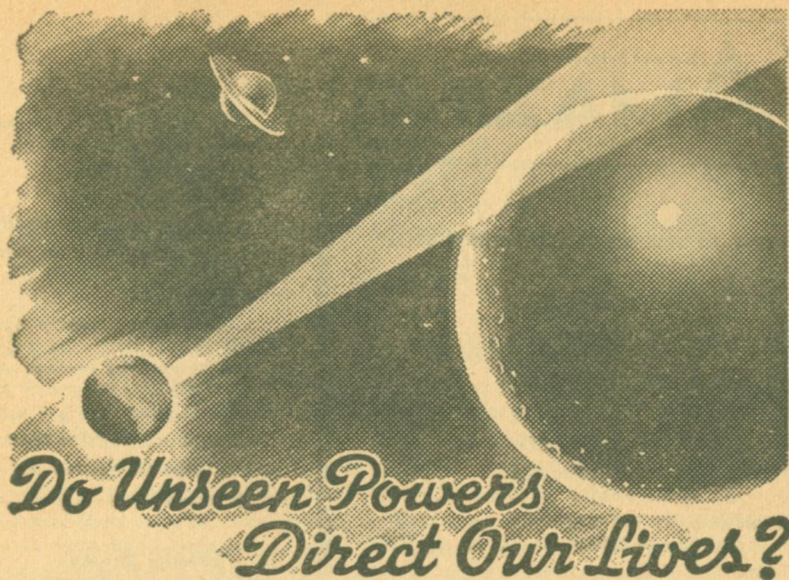
THE OTHER SIDE OF TIME

Watch for the April

FANTASTIC

On Sale March 18

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editorial

THOSE Russians, who have been rumored to be experimenting with telepathy for military communications, and who are investigating the practical applications of "seeing by touch," are now off and running with another sf device—an electronic machine that induces sleep.

The machine is already used in Soviet hospitals; patents for it were recently granted in the U.S. (The patent lawyer tested it by putting his partner out cold on the office floor in four minutes flat.) A current made up of AC superimposed on DC is fed to a person's eyelids and nape of neck. There is a brief tingling sensation, a fleeting visual pattern of alternating black-and-white, and then deep sleep; sleep so deep, in fact, it has been used as a substitute for anesthesia in surgery! Induced sleep is supposed to be more refreshing than natural sleep—which should surprise no one in this age when anything synthetic is touted as better than its natural counterpart.

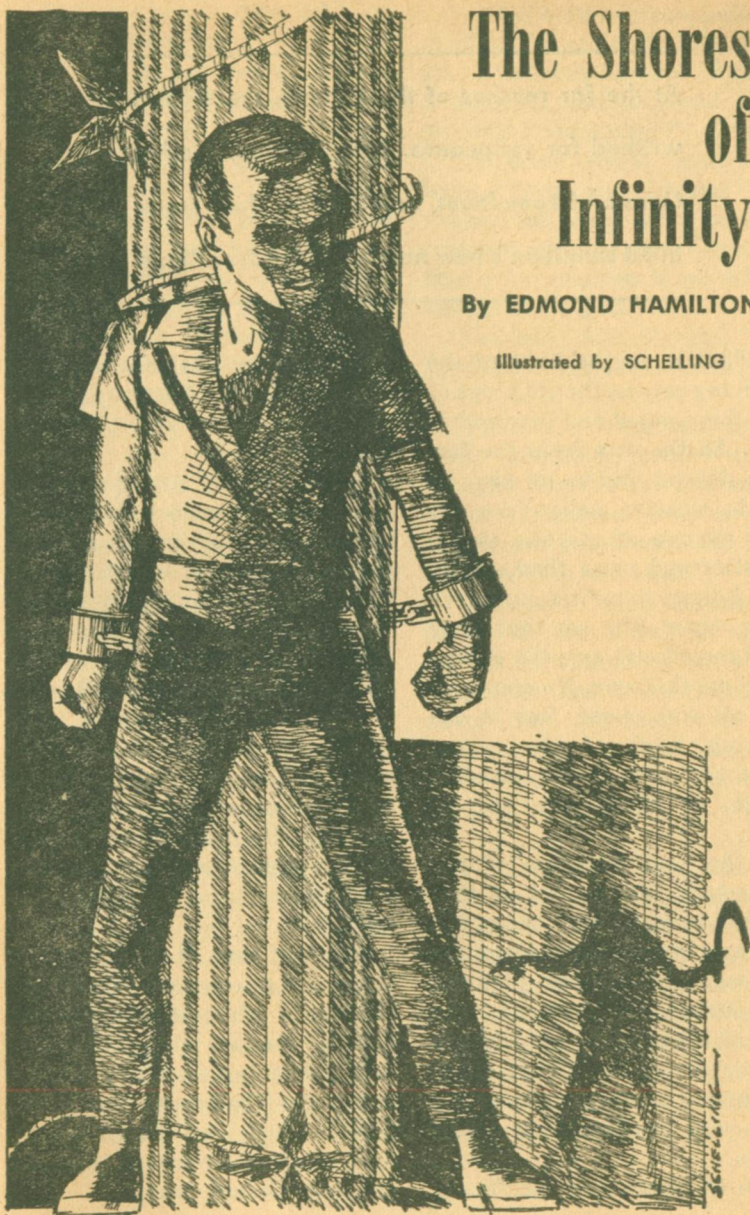
The sleep-machine may be marketed here. It works from an ordinary outlet, or on batteries. A transistorized version weighs only four pounds. Sponsors hope for hospitals, home and office use: something to refresh the tired businessman, soothe the insomniac. Something to make us realize once again how often, in the coming years, will science force us to choose between the good and dubious uses of its genius.

CONGRATULATIONS are due Isaac Asimov again. He will receive in April the American Chemical Society's \$1,000 award for "increasing the public understanding of chemistry" through his writings. The Good Doctor announced that his "key characteristic is single-mindedness," and that the "delights of non-fiction" made him give up his research, his teaching, and "finally even my science-fiction," which is the only bad thing we see about the whole affair. Well, anyway, Isaac, congratulations!

The Shores of Infinity

By EDMOND HAMILTON

Illustrated by SCHELLING



**At the far reaches of the Galaxy, the H'Harn
writhed for vengeance. John Gordon, serving
Lianna of Fomalhaut, searches for their secret
in Ed Hamilton's new novelet of the Star Kings.**

OUTSIDE, in the light of the flying moons, the old kings of Fomalhaut stood and dreamed in stone. All the way from the far-flung distant lights of city up to this massive palace ran the great avenue of statues, eleven dynasties and more than a hundred kings, towering up much larger than life so that they would dwarf and awe the envoys who came this way. No one came now, all was silent, but in the changing light of the racing moons, the stone faces seemed to change, to smile, to glare, to brood.

In the vast darkness of the throne-hall, looking out at that mighty avenue, John Gordon felt small and insignificant. From the shadowed walls other pictured faces looked down at him, the faces of other great ones in the long history of Fomalhaut Kingdom, and it seemed to him that there was contempt in their glance.

Man of Earth, man of the old

20th Century that is now two hundred thousand years ago . . . what do you here out of your own place and time?

What, indeed? And a sense of terrifying alienage took Gordon by the throat, and he seemed reeling, falling out of everything, a lost soul wandering whimpering through the parsecs and the ages.

He fought that feeling, as he had had to fight it before. He was still John Gordon, man of 20th Century New York, even though he stood here sextillions of miles and millennia of years away from all that. He was himself, even though he had twice spanned the nightmare gulfs of space and time.

The first time, it had been his mind only, drawn across the abyss and for a while inhabiting the body of another man, before finally returning to his own body and place. The second time, this time, he had been drawn *physically* into this far-future universe of the star kingdoms.

And why had he done it? Why had he risked dissolution and death, and let his body's ultimate particles be drawn across the deeps of time to be reassembled in this far future day? He had thought it was for the woman with whom he had fallen in love when, in the body of Zarth Arn, a son of star kings, he had come to this age before. But now she found him a stranger, and to Gordon she seemed unattainable, and why had he done it, why, why, why . . .

Sweat was on his forehead and his whole body was trembling as he stood there in the shadows of the mighty hall. He started violently as he heard a sibilant voice, a voice that was as alien as everything else around him.

"It is strange, Gordon, that you were not afraid when there was great peril, but tremble now."

Korkhann was so vague in the shadows that he might have been human. Then his feathers rustled and his beaked face and wise eyes pushed forward into a bar of the shifting moonlight.

"I've asked you before," Gordon said, "not to read my mind."

"You do not know much about telepathic powers," Korkhann said mildly. "I have not violated your mental privacy. But I cannot help receiving your emotions." After a moment he added, "I am to bring you to the Council . . . Lianna sent me."

Gordon's resentment boiled up in him. "What use has the Council, or Lianna, for me? What do I know of things here? I'm a primitive, remember?"

"In some ways," said Korkhann, "you are. Lianna is a woman but she is also a reigning princess, and you must remember that your relation is as difficult for her as for you."

"Oh, hell," said Gordon. "Now I get advice for the lovelorn, from a . . . a . . ."

"From an overgrown mynah bird." Korkhann picked up the thought that Gordon had not uttered. "I assume that is some creature of your own world. Well. The advice is still good."

"I'm sorry," said Gordon, and meant it. He hadn't quite got used to unhumans yet but he and Korkhann had been through a nasty time together, and Korkhann was the one who had pulled them through at the end of it. He said, "I'll come."

THEY left the vast, shadowy hall and went along spacious corridors. They met almost no one, it was late at night, but Gordon had a feeling that there was tension in the silence that enveloped the palace, a brooding sense of danger. He knew that that was all in his own mind, the danger was not here, it was out there in the Marches of Outer Space, the wild frontier of the

galaxy. Yet the fact that the Council of the Kingdom of Fomalhaut was meeting this late, only hours after their cruiser had brought Lianna and Korkhann and himself to the throne-world, was evidence enough of how gravely that danger was regarded.

In the small, panelled room they came to, four faces looked up at Gordon with expressions between irritation and hostility. Korkhann was the only non-human of the Council, and Lianna, at the head of the little table, nodded to Gordon and spoke the names of the four men.

"Is this necessary?" asked the youngest of the four, a middle-aged man with burly brows. He added bluntly, "We've heard of your attachment to this Earthman, Highness, but I fail to see why . . ."

"I didn't ask to be here," Gordon said stiffly. "I . . ."

Lianna's blue eyes flashed toward him, and she cut in quickly, "It is necessary, Abro. Sit down, John Gordon."

He sat down at the far end of the table, and bristled inwardly, until Korkhann whispered, "Must you be so damned fighty?" and that coming from a bird-thing with wise yellow eyes startled Gordon into a brief smile. He relaxed a little.

The man called Abro spoke and in so doing, ignored Gordon in a

way that was a studied insult.

"It stands thus: The attempt that Narath Teyn made against you, his daring to use force against the sovereign of Fomalhaut, shows that he's dangerous. I say, hit him. Send a squadron of heavy cruisers to Teyn to teach him and his Gernns a lesson."

Inwardly, Gordon agreed, having still a vivid memory of how narrow a squeak had saved them from destruction at Teyn. But Lianna shook her pale-golden head slowly.

"My cousin Narath is not the danger. He's long conspired to replace me, but with only his wild, barbaric non-humans for allies, he could do nothing. But now . . . he has as allies at least some of the Counts of the Marches of Outer Space."

"Hit the Marches, then," said Abro harshly.

Gordon began to like this blunt, tough character who had given him such a hostile greeting. But Korkhann spoke, in his hesitant, whistling voice.

"There is something hidden," he said. "Some veiled, unknown forces are working from behind the Counts and Narath Teyn. One such was at Teyn and it was he who nearly destroyed us, but who or what he was, we could not tell. . . ."

Gordon perfectly remembered that cowed, unidentifiable figure

who had come to Teyn with the Count Cyn Cryver, and whose hammer of mental force had shattered them with its inconceivable power.

And so did Lianna remember, for he saw the slight pallor that came into her face.

"Use force against the Counts and we'll find out who or what is behind them," said one of the other councillors. "Abro is right."

"I think you are forgetting something," said Lianna. "The Counts are allies of the Empire."

"So are we allies of the Empire, and better and more dependable allies!" said Abro.

Lianna nodded. "I agree. But all the same, we can't go into the Marches without first taking the matter up with Throon."

THEY didn't like it, Gordon saw that. Like most of the men of the smaller star-kingdoms they had an inordinate pride, and asking anyone's permission went against the grain. But all the same, the Empire was the Empire, the greatest single power in the galaxy, ruling an inconceivable vastness of suns and worlds and people from the royal world that circled the mighty sun Canopus.

She had silenced them, for the moment. She added, "I'm sending Korkhann to take it up with them. And with him will go John Gordon."

Gordon's heart gave a great beat of excitement. To Throon! He would see it again . . .

An angry protest had already formed on Abro's lips, but it was Hastus Nor, oldest of the councillors, who voiced the objection. He looked down the table at Gordon and then he turned to Lianna.

He said, "It is no concern of ours if you have favorites, Highness. But it is our concern if you let them meddle in statecraft. No."

Lianna sprang up, her eyes blazing. The old man did not flinch from her anger. But before she could speak, Korkhann interrupted so smoothly and swiftly that it hardly seemed like an interruption at all.

"With your permission, Highness, I would like to answer that," he said. He looked around the hostile quartet of faces. "You all know, I think, that I have certain powers and that I have not often been wrong in a matter of fact."

"Get to it, Korkhann," growled the old councillor.

"Very well," said Korkhann. His wing unfolded and his little clawed hand rested on Gordon's shoulder. "I will say this, as a fact. No one . . . I say, *no one*, in the whole galaxy, would have as much influence in the councils of the Empire as this Earthman, John Gordon."

Gordon looked up at him, startled. "So you *have* been mind-reading?" he muttered. "Or did she tell you . . ."

Korkhann ignored him, and looked steadily around the faces. On them, hostility faded into puzzlement.

"But why . . . how?" demanded Abro.

Korkhann made the odd shrugging movement that made his feathers ruffle as in a wind.

"I have given you the fact. I will not explain."

They stared, frowning and curious, at Gordon, until old Hastus Nor finally rumbled, "If Korkhann says it, it must be so, even though . . ." He stopped, then went on decisively. "Let the man Gordon go."

Gordon spoke softly for the first time at that table. "Has anyone asked me where I *want* to go?"

He was mad clear through at being treated like a pawn, being argued over and challenged and defended, and he would have gone on to say so but Lianna spoke decisively.

"The council is ended, gentlemen."

They went out with no more said, and when they had gone, Lianna came toward Gordon.

"Why did you say that?" she asked. "You want to go."

"Why should I?"

"Don't lie," she said. "I saw

the eagerness in your face when it was suggested that you go to Throon."

She looked up at him and he saw the pain and doubt in her clear eyes.

"For a little while, after death had just passed us by at Teyn, I thought we had come closer," she said. "I thought it would be as it had been before with us. But I was wrong about you. It's not me you care about."

"That," said Gordon angrily, "is a fine thing to say to a man who risked his life to get here to you."

"Did you risk it to reach *me*, John Gordon? Was it me you remembered and longed for, back in that distant age of yours, or was it the adventure, the star-ships, all that our age has that yours had not, that you really longed to return to?"

There was just enough truth in the accusation to take the anger out of Gordon, and the moment of half-guilt he felt must have shown on his face, for Lianna, looking up at him, smiled a white and bitter smile.

"I thought so," she said, and turned away. "Go to Throon, then, and be damned."

2

ALL the way to Canopus, Gordon spent his waking time in the bridge of the fast scout.

Through the windows that were not really windows, he watched the star-groups rise up and change and fall behind. After the arid years on little Earth, he could not get enough of stars.

The titanic jumble of suns that was Hercules Cluster, the seat of power of those mighty Barons who looked on star-kings as merely equals, dropped past them to the west. The vast mass of faintly glowing drift that was known as the Deneb Shoals, they skirted. They plunged on and now they were passing through the space where, that other time, the space-fleets of the Empire and its allies had fought out their final Armageddon with the League of the Dark Worlds.

Gordon looked and dreamed. Far, far off southward lay the sprawling blotch of deeper darkness that was the Cloud, from which the armadas of the Dark Worlds had poured in their prideful menace. He remembered Thalarna and he remembered Shorr Kan, the master of the League, and how he had surrendered to defeat.

"You think too much of past things, and not enough of the present ones," said Korkhann, watching him shrewdly.

Gordon smiled. "If you know as much about me as I think you know, can you blame me? I was an impostor, I hardly knew what I was doing in that battle, but

I was *there*, and who could forget that?"

"Power is a heady wine," said Korkhann. "You had it once, the power of a universe in your hand. Do you long for it again?"

"No," said Gordon, startled by this echo of Lianna's accusation. "I was scared to death of it when I had it."

"Were you, John Gordon?"

Before Gordon could frame an irritated answer to that, Korkhann had gone away from the bridge.

His irritation faded and was forgotten as, in the time that followed, the heart-worlds of the mighty Mid-Galactic Empire brightened far ahead.

The stunning blue-white flare of Canopus was arrogant in its hugeness and intensity. And as the scout rushed on, there came into view the planets that circled that truly royal sun. Gordon's eyes clung to one of those planets, a gray, cloud-wrapped sphere. Throon . . .

He was remembering how he had first seen it, mazed and bewildered by this future universe, playing a part for which he had no preparation, a pawn in the hands of cosmic political powers whose purposes he could not dream.

Was he anything more than that right now? Wasn't he brought here to Throon so that Korkhann might exploit his sup-

posed influence with Jhal Arn, sovereign of the Empire? Yes, he thought, it's true. But it's not just for Romalhaut policies, it's for Lianna and against whatever mysterious, menacing thing was hatching out in the Marches that threatened her most immediately.

The planet rose up to meet him, its gray-green bulk immense, the sprawling continents starred with glittering metropolises that flared in the white sunlight. Then a mighty ocean and then, far ahead, what his eyes leaped to meet, the dazzling radiance that almost blinded the gaze, the Glass Mountains of smooth silicates flinging back the sunset light in shaking spears and fans and banners of glory. They went over that radiance, through it, and ahead of them there loomed the cluster of fairy-like glass towers that was the greatest capital in the galaxy.

Over its starport, the traffic was of tremendous volume. Gordon had forgotten how many ships came and went to this center of the Empire. Clocked smoothly in by the director-computers, the bulky arrogant liners from Deneb and Aldebaran and Sol came down to the inport like a parade of giants, while the smaller craft poured like a cata-ract of shining midges. But their own craft, being official, skirted all this and descended toward

the naval port, where the giant warships of the Empire loomed like dark thunderclouds above their docks.

AN hour later, they stood in the huge building that was the seat of a dynasty and the administrative center of the Empire.

Zarth Arn came to meet them, a tall figure, his dark face breaking into a smile and then becoming serious as he took Gordon's hand.

"I could wish your return to Throon had been on another occasion than this," he said. And he said, to Korkhann, "Yes, my brother knows why you have come. You're not the first on this errand."

Korkhann asked quickly, "The others are worried about the Marches, Highness?"

Zarth Arn nodded. "They are. But that's to be talked of later . . . to hell with diplomacy, Gordon and I have some drinking to do!" He led Gordon to a smoothly gliding motowalk. It carried them on into another hall, a vast chamber whose glass walls were adorned with flattened reliefs of dark stars, burned-out cindery suns, ebon cosmic drift, an overpowering impression of gloom and majesty. Gordon remembered this somber magnificence, and he remembered also the equally splendid hall beyond it that

seemed encompassed by the glow of a flaming nebula. The moto-walk bore them upward on a smooth slant.

Everywhere, courtiers and chamberlains bowed deeply to Zarth Arn. It seemed to Gordon that they looked a little askance at him, walking familiarly with the prince of the Empire.

"Does it seem strange to you?" he asked Zarth Arn. "To walk with me, knowing that once we inhabited each other's bodies?"

Zarth Arn smiled. "Not to me. You must remember that I crossed time many times before, and dwelt in many other bodies on those occasions, though all that is over now. But I suspect it is very strange indeed, to you."

They came to Zarth Arn's chambers, that Gordon so well remembered, high-ceilinged and austere white except for their silken hangings. The racks of thought-spools still stood at one side of the room. He went to the tall open windows and out onto the balcony that was like a small terrace jutting from the side of the huge, oblong palace. He looked again across Throon City.

It might have been that other time, he thought. For Canopus was setting, flinging a long, level radiance across the fairy-like towers of the metropolis, and the heaving green ocean, and the Glass Mountains that now were a rampart of dazzling glory.

Gordon stared bemused, until Zarth Arn's voice woke him from the spell.

"Do you find it the same Gordon?" he asked, handing him a tall glass of the brown liquor called *sagua*.

"Not quite," muttered Gordon.

Zarth Arn understood. "Liana was here that other time, wasn't she? I didn't mean to ask yet, but now . . . tell me, what of you two?"

"We haven't quite quarrelled," Gordon answered. "But . . . she seems to think it wasn't for her I came, but for . . . this."

And his gesture took in the whole vista of the magnificence of the great city, the flashing radiance of the mountains, the majesty of the star-ships rising from the distant starport.

THEY were interrupted by the opening of the door. The man who entered was tall and stalwart, dressed in black with a small blazing insigne on his chest. His eyes were level and searching as he came toward Gordon.

Gordon knew him. Jhal Arn, the elder brother of Zarth Arn, and the sovereign of the Mid-Galactic Empire.

"It is strange," said Jhal Arn. "You know me, of course, from that other time. But I see you . . . the physical you . . . for the first time."

He held out his hand. "Zarth has told me that this was the gesture of greeting in your time. You are welcome in Throon, John Gordon. You are very welcome."

The words were quiet and without emphasis, but the handgrip was strong.

"But more of this later," said Jhal Arn. "You've brought a problem to Throon. And not you alone . . . we have important visitors from some of the Empire's strongest allies, and they too are troubled."

He went over and looked thoughtfully out at the city, whose lights were coming on as the sunset faded into dusk. Two moons shone out in the twilight sky, one of them warm golden and the other one a ghostly silver in hue.

"A whisper has gone through the galaxy," said Jhal Arn. "A murmur, a breath, a sourceless rumor. And it says that in the Marches of Outer Space there is a mystery and a danger. Nothing more than that. But the very vagueness of it has disturbed some who are high in the star-kingdoms, while others scoff at it, as mere fancy."

"It wasn't fancy that we encountered at Teyn," said Gordon. "Korkhann can tell you . . ."

"Korkhann has already told me," nodded Jhal Arn. "I sent for him, straight after you two arrived. And . . . I don't like what I heard."

He shook his head. "Later on, tonight, a decision will have to be taken. It is one that could shatter the political fabric of the galaxy. And yet we must make it, knowing so little. . . ." He broke off, and turned to leave, and at the door turned round and gave Gordon a crooked smile. "You sat in my place once, for a little while, John Gordon. I tell you that it is still a painful place."

When he had left, Zarth Arn said, "I'll take you to the suite assigned you and Korkhann. I saw that it was close to this one . . . we have much to talk about."

He parted from Gordon at the door of the suite. Gordon went in, and was surprised by the luxury of the big room he entered. By comparison, Zarth Arn's was spartan. But Zarth Arn had always been more of the austere scholar-scientist than anything else.

He noticed the back of a feathered head above the back of a metal chair, and saw that Korkhann sat by the open window looking out at the flashing panorama of lights, the brilliant lights of Throon City and the distant lights of great star-liners coming down across the star-decked sky.

Gordon walked toward the window and around the chair, saying, "I don't like what I've been hearing, Korkhann. I . . ."

Then Gordon stopped, and suddenly shouted.

"Korkhann!"

THE feathered one sat in unnatural immobility. And his face, the beaked face and wise yellow eyes that Gordon had first come to tolerate and then to like, was strangely stony. The eyes were as opaque as cold yellow jewels, and they had not the faintest flicker of expression in them.

Gordon gripped him with his hands, feeling the astonishing slightness and fragility of the body beneath the feathers.

"Korkhann, what's happened to you? Wake up . . ."

After a moment, there was something in the eyes . . . a passing ripple of awareness. And of agony. A damned soul looking out for a split-second from a place of everlasting punishment might have such an expression.

Sweat stood on Gordon's forehead. He continued to shake Korkhann, to call his name. The agony reappeared in the eyes, it was as though there was a mighty straining of the mind behind those eyes, and then it was as though something snapped and Korkhann huddled sick and shaking, his wings quivering wildly. Inarticulate whistling sounds came from his throat.

"What was it?" cried Gordon.

It was a minute before Kor-

khann could look up at him, and now his eyes were wild.

"Something that I, and you, have experienced before. But worse. You remember the Cowled One at Narath Teyn, and how with his mental power he hammered us and sought to grip our minds?"

A coldness came upon Gordon. He remembered only too well the mystery-wrapped shape whose face and form none of them had seen, the enigmatic ally of Cyn Cryver and others of the Counts of the Marches, whom even the Gerrns had dreaded.

"Yes," whispered Korkhann. "Whatever they are, one of them is here. Here, I think, in this palace."

3

THE imperial palace of Throon throbbed and glittered in the night. Out of hundreds of windows poured soft light and drifting music and the hum of many voices. The arrival of dignitaries of other star-kingdoms was occasion for a state ball, and in the great halls a brilliant throng feasted and drank. Nor was that throng all human. Scale and hide and feather brushed against silken garments. Faces humanoid but not human, slanted eyes, slitted and saucer-like and pupilless eyes, gleamed in the light. Gargoyle shapes walked the dark

gardens in which glowed great plantings of the luminous flowers of Achernar.

As though in grim reminder that the Empire was not all a matter of pleasure-making, the music and hum of voices were drowned by a vast, thunderous bellowing as a full score of warships went up into the starry sky. The smaller scouts and phantoms had already screamed heavenward and now the great battle-cruisers lifted, dark bulks against the constellations, outbound toward the Pleiades and the big fleet-bases there.

Gordon had seen little of the festive part of the palace. He had walked with Zarth Arn behind Jhal Arn as the sovereign made an appearance there, and then they had come up here to the private chambers of Jhal Arn.

He had noted the curious gaze that the throng below had directed at himself. They were wondering, he knew, why an untitled Earthman should accompany an emperor.

He said now, "I feel I should have stayed with Korkhann. He was pretty badly shaken."

"My own guards are watching over him," said Jhal Arn. "He'll be here soon for the meeting. And there's someone else I've sent for, whom I think you'll remember, Gordon."

Presently a man entered the chambers. He wore the uniform

of a captain in the imperial space-fleet, and he was a big, burly man with bristling black hair and a craggy, copper-colored face. At sight of him, Gordon leaped to his feet.

"Hull Burrel!"

The big officer looked at him puzzledly. "I can't remember that we've met. . . ."

Gordon sank back into his chair. Of course Hull didn't recognize him. To both his best friend and the woman he loved, he was a stranger now. He felt a bitterness at the impossible situation he had put himself in when he had come to this age in his own physical body.

"Captain Burrel," said Jhal Arn. "Do you remember that when the League of the Dark Worlds attacked the Empire, an attempted assassination had already stricken me down, so that my brother acted as ruling regent in that crisis?"

A glow came onto Hull Burrel's battered coppery face. "Am I likely to forget it, highness? It was Prince Zarth Arn we followed when we smashed the League, in that last battle off Deneb!"

Jhal Arn went on. "When Shorr Kan sent the armadas of the League to attack us, he broadcast a galaxy-wide propaganda message. I want you to see a tape of part of that."

As Zarth Arn touched a but-

ton beside his chair, against an opposite wall appeared a stereovision picture of lifelike vividness. The picture was of a man speaking.

Gordon tensed in his chair. The man was tall and broad-shouldered, his black hair clipped short, his eyes keen and flashing. His voice cut like a swordblade, and the whole impact of that ruthless, amoral, mocking personality came through even in this reproduction.

"Shorr Kan," whispered Gordon.

He was not likely to forget the dictator of the League, the utterly cynical, utterly capable leader with whom Gordon had struggled for the fate of kingdoms.

"Listen," said Jhal Arn.

And Gordon heard it again and seemed transported back to that terrible moment. Shorr Kan was saying, "The Empire's regent, Zarth Arn, is not really Zarth Arn at all . . . he is an *impostor* masquerading as Zarth Arn. Star-kings and Barons, do not follow this impostor to defeat and doom!"

THE stereovision scene vanished. Hull Burrel turned, looking puzzled, and said. "I remember that, higness. His accusation was so ridiculous that no one paid any attention to it."

"The accusation was true," Jhal Arn said flatly.

Hull Burrel looked at his sovereign with incredulity written large on his face. He started to speak, then thought better of it. He looked at Zarth Arn.

Zarth Arn smiled. "Yes. Shorr Kan spoke the truth. Few know, but in past years I used scientific means to exchange minds with men of other worlds and times. One such experiment was with the man beside you . . . John Gordon of Earth. It was Gordon, in my body, who was regent of the Empire at that moment of crisis. And Shorr Kan had found it out."

He touched a control again and said, "You'll remember that after the League fleet was smashed, the men of the Dark Worlds admitted defeat and asked for a truce. This was their telestereo message of surrender, which you've seen before."

Another scene flashed into existence against the wall, one that was etched forever in Gordon's memory. In a room of Shorr Kan's palace appeared a group of wild-looking men, and one of them spoke hoarsely.

"The Dark Worlds agree to surrender on your terms, Prince Zarth! Shorr Kan's tyranny is overthrown. When he refused to surrender, we rose in rebellion against him. I can prove that by letting you see him . . . he is dying."

The telestereo scene switched

abruptly to another room of the palace. Behind a desk sat Shorr Kan. Men around him had their weapons trained on him, and his face was marble-white as he clutched at a blackened wound in his side. His dulled eyes cleared for a moment and he grinned weakly.

"You win," he said. "Devil of a way to end up, isn't it? But I'm not complaining, I had one life and used it to the limit. You're the same way, at bottom." His voice trailed to a whisper. "Maybe I'm a throwback to your world, Gordon? Born out of my time? Maybe . . ."

And he sprawled forward across his desk and lay still, and one of the grim-faced men bent to examine him and then said, "He's dead. Better for the Dark Worlds if he'd never been born."

The reproduced scene snapped out. After a moment of stunned silence, Hull Burrel spoke in a voice that echoed his stupefaction.

"I remember that. I couldn't understand what he meant by addressing Prince Zarth as 'Gordon'. None of us could." He swung around until his dazed eyes stared into Gordon's face. "Then *you* were the one who was with me in that struggle? You . . . the one who defeated Shorr Kan?"

Zarth Arn nodded. "It's so."

Gordon drew a long breath,

and then he held out his hand and said, "Hello, Hull."

The Antarian . . . for Hull Burrel was a native of a world of Antares . . . continued to stare dumbly, then seized Gordon's hand and began to babble excitedly. He was cut short by the entrance of Korkhann.

Korkhann answered, to a question from Jhal Arn, "Yes, highness, I am quite recovered."

Gordon doubted that. The yellow eyes were haunted, and there was a fear in the beaked face he had not seen there before.

"The palace has been searched and no trace of this mysterious attacker has been found," Jhal Arn was saying. "Tell us exactly what happened."

KORKANN'S voice dropped to a whisper. "There's little I can tell. It was the same sensation of overwhelming mental impact that I felt at Teyn, but stronger, more irresistible. I could not fight it this time, not even for a second. I knew nothing, then, until Gordon's shouting and shaking of me brought me back to consciousness. But . . . I believe that while I was held in that grip, my mind was being examined, all my memories and knowledge ransacked, by a telepath compared to whom I am as a child."

Jhal Arn leaned forward. "Tell me, when this power has seized

you, has there been a sensation as of mental *cold*?"

Korkhann looked astonished. "How could you guess that, highness?"

Jhal Arn did not answer, but between him and his brother flashed a look that was grim and somber.

A chamberlain entered the room, announcing dignitaries whom Jhal Arn greeted with formal protocol. Gordon, hearing the names of some and recognizing others, felt a sharp wonder.

No less than three star-kings had come to this secret meeting . . . young Sath Shamar of Polaris, the aging King-Regent of Cassiopeia, and the dark, crafty-looking sovereign of the Kingdom of Cepheus. There were chancellors of two other kingdoms present, and also one of the mightiest of the powerful Hercules Barons, Jon Ollen. His domain stretched so far from the Cluster to the edge of the Marche that it was actually bigger than some of the smaller kingdoms.

He looked now like a worried man, his cadaverous face gloomy in expression. Gordon remembered his galactography well enough to realize that every realm represented here lay near the Marches of Outer Space.

Jhal Arn began without preamble. "You've all heard the rumors that certain of the Counts of the Marches are preparing

some mysterious and dangerous aggression. It threatens all of you but first it threatens Fomalhaut, which is why Korkhann and my friend John Gordon have come here."

Jhal Arn emphasized the word "friend", and the men who had ignored Gordon until this moment, glanced at him sharply.

Jhal Arn went on, "Tell them what happened at Teyn, Korkhann."

Korkhann told them, of how Narath Teyn had tried to seize Lianna and of how he had had as allies, not only at least some of the Counts of the Marches, but also the cowed stranger whose face and form no man had seen but whose terrible mental power they had felt.

When Korkhann finished, there was a silence. Then young Sath Shamar said troubledly, "Of mysterious allies, we have heard nothing. But lately the Counts have become high-handed with us at Polaris, and have threatened us with powers they say could destroy us."

The tight-faced ruler of Cepheus added nothing, but the old Regent of Cassiopeia nodded confirmation. "There is something in the Marches . . . never have the Counts been so insolent with us."

Korkhann looked at the Baron and said softly, "You have something more than this, Jon Ollen?"

It seems to me that you are withholding something from us."

Jon Ollen's cadaverous face flushed dull red with anger and he exclaimed, "I will not have my mind read, telepath!"

"And how," asked Korkhann deprecatingly, "could I do that when you have kept a guard upon your thoughts since you entered this chamber?"

Jon Ollen said sullenly, "I don't want to hunt for trouble. My Barony is close up against the Marches, closer than any of your domains. If there is danger, I am most vulnerable to it."

JHAL Arn's voice rang decisively. "You are an ally of the Empire. If danger attacks you, we come in with you at once. If you know anything, say it."

Jon Ollen looked indecisive, worried, troubled. It was a minute before he spoke.

"I know but little, really. But . . . inside the Marches, not far from our frontier, is a world known as Aar. And mysterious things have happened that seem to focus on that world."

"What kind of things?"

"A merchant-ship returned into my Barony from the Marches, travelling on an insane course. Our cruisers could not understand its behavior and ran it down and boarded it. Every man aboard it was raving mad. The automatic log-recorder

showed that it had touched last at Aar. Then another ship that passed near Aar sent off a distress-call that was suddenly smothered. And that ship never was heard of again."

"What else?"

Jon Ollen's face lengthened. "There came to my court the Count Cyn Cryver of the Marches. He said that certain scientific experiments had made Aar dangerous and suggested we order all ships to avoid it. But "suggested" is hardly the word . . . he *ordered* me to do this."

"It would seem," muttered Jhal Arn thoughtfully, "that Aar is at least one focal point of the mystery."

"We could send a squadron in there to find out quickly," said Zarth Arn.

"But what if there's nothing really there?" cried Jon Ollen. "The Counts would hold me responsible for the incursion. You must understand my position."

"We understand it," Jhal Arn assured him. And to his brother, "No, Zarth. The Baron is right on that . . . if there's nothing there we'd have angered the Counts by an invasion of their domain, to the point of starting a border war all through the Marches. We'll slip a small unmarked scout into the Marches, with a few men who can investigate the place. Captain Burrel, you can lead them."

Gordon spoke up for the first time in that meeting. "I will go with Hull. Look, I'm the only one except Korkhann, who's not fitted for this kind of mission, to have ever *seen* one of the Counts' cryptic allies. At Teyn, remember."

"Why am I not fitted for such a mission?" Korkhann demanded, his feathers seeming to ruffle up with anger.

"Because no one else is so well fitted to be Princess Lianna's chancellor, and she mustn't lose you," said Gordon soothingly.

"It's a risky thing," muttered Jon Ollen. "I beg of you one thing . . . if you are caught, please don't implicate me in this."

"Your concern for the safety of my friends is overpowering," said Jhal Arn acidly.

The Baron disregarded the satire. He got to his feet. "I shall return home at once. I don't want to be mixed in this affair too much. Your highnesses, gentlemen . . . good night."

When he had gone out, Sath Shamar uttered an oath. "It's what I'd have expected of him. In the battle with the Dark Worlds, when the other Barons gave the galaxy an example of space-fighting it can never forget, he held back until sure that Shorr Kan was defeated."

Jhal Arn nodded. "But the strategic position of his domain

makes him valuable as an ally, so we have to put up with his selfishness."

WHEN the star-kings and chancellors had left, Jhal Arn looked a little sadly at Gordon.

"I wish you were not set on going, my friend. Did you come back to us, only to risk your neck?"

Gordon saw Korkhann looking at him, and knew what was in his mind. He remembered Lianna's bitter farewell, her accusation that it was the danger and wild beauty of this wider universe that had drawn him back here, and not love for her. He stubbornly told himself it wasn't true.

"You have said yourself," he reminded Jhal Arn, "that this danger most threatens Fomalhaut. And whatever threatens Lianna is my affair."

He was not sure that Jhal Arn believed him, and he was quite sure that Korkhann did not believe him at all.

Three days later a very small ship lay ready at the naval starport of Throon. It was a phantom-scout, but all the insignia had been removed from it, and the small crew of it did not wear uniform. Neither did Hull Burrel, who was to captain it.

In the palace, before he left, Gordon had a final word from Zarth Arn.

"We hope you come back with information, John Gordon. But if you don't . . . then in thirty days three full Empire squadrons will head for that world of Aar."

Gordon was surprised, and a little appalled. "But that could lead to war in the Marches . . . your brother admitted it."

"There are worse things than a border war," Zarth Arn said somberly. "You must remember our history that you learned before. You remember Brenn Bir?"

The name rang in Gordon's memory. "Of course. Your remote ancestor, the founder of your dynasty . . . the leader who repelled that alien invasion from the Magellanic Clouds outside the galaxy."

"And who wrecked part of the galaxy in doing it," Zarth Arn nodded. "We still have his records, archives that the galaxy knows nothing about. And some details in the description you and Korkhann gave of the cowed stranger at Reyn, made us look into those archives."

Gordon felt a terrifying surprise, and it was verified by Zarth Arn's next words.

"The records of Brenn Bir describe the Magellanian aliens as having a mental power so terrific that no human or non-human could withstand it. Only by disrupting space and hurling them out of this dimension were those

invaders defeated. And now . . . it seems that after all these thousands of years, they are coming back again!"

4

THE Marches of Outer Space had been, originally, an area only vaguely delimited. Early galactographers had defined it as that part of the galaxy which lay between the eastern and southern kingdoms, and the edge of the island-universe. For when, in the 22nd Century, the three inventions of the faster-than-light sub-spectrum rays, the Mass Control, and the stasis-force that cradled men's bodies so they remained impervious to extreme speeds and accelerations . . . when these made interstellar travel possible and the human stock poured out from Earth to colonize the galaxy, it had been toward the bigger star-systems they had gone, not the rim. Millennia later, when distant systems had broken away from Earth government and formed independent kingdoms, hardy adventurers in those kingdoms had gone into the starry wilderness of the Marches, setting up small domains that often were limited to one star and world.

These Counts of the Marches, as they called themselves, had always been a tough, insolent breed. They owed allegiance to no

star-king, though they had a nominal alliance with the Empire which prevented the other kingdoms from invading their small realms. The place had long been a focus of intrigue, a refuge for outlawed men, an irritation on the body-politic of the galaxy. But each jealous star-king refused to let his rivals take over the Marches, and so the situation had perpetuated itself.

"And that," thought Gordon, "is too damned bad. If this anarchic star-jungle had been cleaned up, it wouldn't harbor such danger now."

The little phantom-scout ship was well inside the Marches, moving on a devious course. By interstellar standards, the phantom's speed was slow. Its defensive armament was almost nonexistent and its offensive weapons were nothing more than a few missiles. But it possessed a supreme advantage for such a stealthy mission as this one . . . the ability to disappear. That was why there were phantoms in the fleet of every kingdom.

"It'd be safer to dark-out," said Hull Burrel, frowning. "But then we'd be running blind ourselves, and I don't like doing that in this mess."

GORDON thought that if it was a mess, it was an impressive one. Scores of stars

burned like great emerald and ruby and diamond lamps in the dark gloom. The radar screen showed shoals of drift between these star-systems, and here and there the Marches were rifted by great darknesses, loops and lanes of cosmic dust.

He looked back the way whence they had come, at Hercules Cluster that blazed like bright moths swarming thick about a lamp, at the far dimmed spark of Canopus. He hoped they would live to go back there. He looked ahead again and his imagination leaped beyond the stars he could see, to those out on the Rim, the spiral, outflying arms of stars that fringed the wheeling galaxy, and beyond which there was nothing until the distant Magellanic Clouds.

"It's too far," he said to Hull. "Zarth Arn must be wrong, there can't really be Magellanians in the Marches. If they'd come they wouldn't have come as stealthily infiltrators, but in a great invasion."

Hull Burrel shook his head. "They came that way once before, so the histories say. And they got annihilated, when Brenn Bir used the Disruptor on them. They might try a different way, this time." The big Antarian captain added, "But I can't believe it, either. It was so long ago."

For a long time the little phan-

tom threaded its way into the Marches, skirting great areas of drift that flowed like rivers of stone through space, tacking and twisting its way around enormous, ashen dark-stars, swinging far wide of inhabited systems.

Finally there came a time when, peering at the viewer, Hull Burrel pointed out a small, bright orange star glittering far away.

"That's it. The sun of Aar."

Gordon looked. "And now?"

"Now we dark-out," grunted the Antarian. "And from here on it'll be cursed ticklish navigating."

He gave the order. An alarm rang through the ship. The big dark-out generators aft began droning loudly. At that moment, all the viewer-windows and radar-screens went dark and blank.

Gordon had been in phantoms before, and had expected the phenomenon. The generators had created an aura of powerful force around the little ship, which force slightly refracted every light-ray or radar-beam that struck it. The phantom had become completely invisible both to the eye and to radar, but by the same token those in it could see nothing outside. Navigation now must be by the special sub-spectrum radar by which the phantom could slowly feel a way forward.

In the time that followed,

Gordon thought that it was remarkably like a 20th Century submarine feeling its way through ocean depths. There was the same feeling of blindness and semi-helplessness, the same dread of collision, in this case with some bit of drift the straining radar might not catch, and the same half-hysterical desire to see sunlight again. And the ordeal went on and on, the sweat standing out in fine beads on Hull Burrel's forehead as he jockeyed the little ship closer toward the single planet of the orange star.

Finally, Hull gave an order and the little ship hung motionless. He turned his glistening face toward Gordon.

"We should be just above the surface of Aar, but that's all I can say I hope to God we don't come out of dark-out right over our enemies heads!"

Gordon shrugged. "Jon Ollen said there wasn't much on this world, that it was mostly wild."

"One thing I love is an optimist who has no direct responsibility," growled the Antarian. "All right. Dark-out off!"

The droning of generators died. Instantly there poured into the bridge through the viewer-screens, a flood of brilliant orange sunlight. They peered tensely out.

"I apologize, optimist," said Hull, "It couldn't be better."

The little ship hung level with the top foliage of a golden forest. The plants . . . Gordon could not think of them as trees although they were that big . . . were thirty to forty feet high, graceful clusters of dark-green stems whose branches bore masses of feathery golden-yellow leaves. As far as the eye could reach, there was nothing but the roof of the forest glittering in the light of the orange sun.

"Take her down fast," ordered Hull. "We could just be ranged by radar up here."

The phantom dropped through the masses of lacy gold and landed in a grave of clustered stems, upon soft ground covered with a copper-colored brush that bore black fruits.

Gordon, peering fascinated through the viewer, suddenly shouted. "Something!"

The Antarian jumped to his side. "What?"

"It's gone now," said Gordon. "Something small, almost invisible that darted away under the brush."

The other looked doubtful. "In the star-log, this world Aar is listed as uninhabited. An attempt was once made to colonize it but the colonists were driven away from it by dangerous conditions. This could be some formidable creature."

Gordon was doubtful. "It seemed too small."

"Nevertheless, we'd better have a look around before we go thrashing through these forests," the Antarian said decisively. He spoke to the crewman in the bridge. "You and I will go out, Varren. Full armor."

Gordon shook his head. "I'll go with Varren. One of us has to stay to complete the mission if something happens to the other . . . and the one who stays had better be the one who can navigate the ship back out of here."

WHEN Gordon and Varren stepped out of the ship they wore the suits that did double-duty as space-suits and defensive armor, complete with helmets. They carried guns.

Looking uncertainly around, Gordon began to feel a bit foolish. Nothing moved except the golden foliage high above, waving in the breeze. His helmet sound-pick-up brought no sound except the faint sounds of a forest.

"Where was this thing you saw?" asked Varren. His voice was very polite.

"Over this way," Gordon said. "I don't know . . . it could have been a leaf blowing. . . ."

He suddenly stopped, looking upward. Twelve feet above the ground, fastened solidly inside a crotch of one of the gold-trees, was a curious thing vaguely resembling a squirrel's summer-

nest. Except that this was no ragged thing of twigs and branches but a solid little box of cut wood, with a door in its side.

"It was going toward this place," said Gordon. "Look."

Varren looked. He looked up for a long time and then he remarked quietly that he would be damned.

"I'm climbing up there to take a look," said Gordon. "If it's what I *thought* I saw, it won't be too dangerous. If not . . . cover me."

The climb would not have been difficult if it had not been for the clumsy armor-suit. But he was sweating by the time he reached a crotch on which he could stand with his face level with the little tree-box.

Gently, Gordon pushed at the little door. A faint snapping told of a tiny catch breaking. He continued to push but it was difficult . . . something someone, was holding the little door on the inside.

Then the resistance gave way, and Gordon looked inside. At first he could see nothing but a purple gloom. But the hot orange sunlight pouring in through the little opened door revealed detail as his eyes adjusted.

Those who had been trying to hold the door against him now cowered terrifiedly at the far side of the little room. They were not much more than a foot high and

they were quite human in shape . . . a man and a woman, naked except for long gloves that he thought might be designed for the gathering of fruit from spiny plants.

The two were semi-transparent. Their bodies were as translucent as plastic.

They cowered, and Gordon stared, and then he heard the man speaking in a tiny voice. He could hardly hear, but it was not a language he knew.

After a long moment, Gordon slid back down to the ground. He pointed upward and said to Varren, "Take a look. Maybe you can understand their language."

"Their *what?*" said Varren. He looked at Gordon as though he doubted his sanity. Then he too climbed up.

IT was a long time before Varren came back down. When he did so, he looked sick.

"I talked with them," he said, and then repeated that as though he didn't quite believe it. "I *talked* with them. Oh, yes, I could understand them. You see, a few thousand years ago they were our own people."

Gordon looked at him incredulously. "Those creatures? But, but . . ."

"The colonists," said Varren. "The ones Captain Burrell read about in the log, that were driven away from here by dangerous

conditions. They didn't all go away. Some had already become victims of the danger . . . a chemical constituent in either the air or water here which, after a few generations, makes the human body evolve toward smallness."

Varren shook his head. "Poor little beggars. They couldn't tell me that but I could guess it from the few scraps of legend they did tell me. It's my guess that they mutated toward that semi-transparency as a camouflage defense against other creatures here."

Gordon shivered. There was beauty and wonder in the stars, but there was also horror.

"One thing I learned," Varren added. "They're terribly afraid of something out there in the west. I got that out of them, but no more."

When they went back into the ship, it was the last statement that interested Hull Burrel most.

"It checks," he said. "We've been making a sweep with sub-spectrum radar and it definitely showed large metal constructions several hundred miles to the west. On this world, that can only be the place we're hunting."

The Antarian thought for a little, then said decisively, "We'd never make that distance on foot. We'll have to wait until night and move the ship closer. If we hug the tree-tops, it might fool their radar."

Night on Aar was a heavy darkness, for this world had no moon. The phantom purred along over foliage glistening in the light of the stars, the scattered, lonesome stars of the Marches. Hull Burrel had the controls. Gordon stood quiet and watched through the viewer-window.

He thought he saw something, finally, something far ahead that glinted a dull reflection of the starlight. He started to speak, but Hull nodded.

"I caught it. We'll go down."

Gordon waited. Instead of going down at once, the little ship slipped onward, he supposed in search for a clear opening for descent into the forest.

He put his eye to the 'scope and peered. The glint of metal ahead sprang closer, and now he saw that the vague metal bulks were the buildings of a small city. There were domes, streets, walls. But there was not a single light there, and he could see that long ago the forest had come into this city's streets, and that its ways were choked with foliage. Without doubt, this would be a center of that tragically doomed colonist venture of many centuries ago.

But there were a few hooded lights beyond the city. He touched the scope-adjustment. He could see little, but it appeared that the old spaceport of the dead city had lain beyond it, a

dark flat surface that the forest had not yet been able to overwhelm.

Gordon could just descry the glint and shape of a few ships parked there. They were small Class Five starships, not much bigger than the phantom-scout. But there was one ship that had something queer about its outline.

He turned to say so to Hull Burrel, and as his eye left the 'scope, he saw that their craft was still gliding straight forward and had not begun to descend.

Gordon exclaimed, "What are you going further for? Do you figure to land at their front door?"

The Antarian did not answer. Gordon took hold of his arm. With a single sweep of his arm, Hull Burrel knocked him sprawling.

But in that moment, Gordon had seen Hull's face. It was stony, immobile, the eyes vacant of all emotion or perception. In a flash, Gordon knew.

He bunched himself and launched in a desperate spring at the Antarian. He knocked Hull away from the controls. But Hull hung onto the controls and dragged them before he was torn loose from them, and the phantom-scout suddenly stood on its head and then dived straight down through the foliage.

Gordon felt the metal wall slap his head, and then there was only darkness in which he fell and fell.

5

IN the darkness Gordon heard the voice of a dead man speaking.

"So that's what he looks like," said the voice. *"Well!"*

Whose voice was it? Gordon's pain-racked brain could not remember. Then how did he know that it was the voice of a dead man? He did not know how he knew, but he was sure that the man who spoke had died.

He must open his eyes and see who it was that spoke after death. He made an effort. And with the effort, the pain and the darkness rolled back across his mind more strongly than before, and he did not know anything.

When he finally awoke, he felt that it was much later. He also felt as though he had one of the biggest headaches in galactic history.

He did get his eyes open this time. He was in a small metal room with a solid metal door. There was a very tiny window with bars, and orange sunlight slanted through the bars.

Across the room from him, Hull Burrel sprawled on the dusty floor like one dead.

Gordon got to his feet. For a

while he stood perfectly still, hoping that he was not going to fall. Then he moved painfully across the room and knelt beside the Antarian.

Hull had a bruise on his chin, but no other perceptible injuries. Yet he lay like a man in deathly coma, his coppery face no longer like the side of a rough rock but gone all slack and sagging. His eyes were closed, but his mouth was open and spittle dribbled from it.

Gordon took him by the shoulders and said, "Hull," and of a sudden the living log turned into a maddened wildcat. Hull scrambled up, thrusting Gordon away, glaring at him as if he were an attacking wild-beast.

Gradually, Hull's eyes cleared. His muscles relaxed. He stared stupidly at Gordon and said, "What the devil's the matter with me?"

"You were slugged," said Gordon. "Not with a club, but with mental force. You were taken under control when we were nearing this place."

"This place?" Hull Burrel looked around, at the small, dusty metal room. "I don't remember," he muttered. "This looks like a prison."

Gordon nodded. "We're in the dead town of the old colonists. And you can't have a town without a jail."

His head ached. And more

than his head was hurt, his pride was bruised. He said, "Hull, I was a sort of hero back in that other time, when I lived in Zarth Arn's body . . . wasn't I?"

Hull stared. "You were. But what . . ."

"I was going to be a hero all over again," said Gordon bitterly. "To show I could be good as John Gordon, too. I've done fine, haven't I? Throon, Lianna . . . they'll be proud of me."

"You weren't leading this mission, I was," growled Hull Burrel. "It was I who fell on my face." He went to the little window and looked out at the street choked with golden foliage. He turned around, his brows knitted. "Mental force, you said. Then there must be one of those damned Magellanians here."

Gordon shrugged. "Who else could do a thing like that? We've been taken like children. They were sitting here waiting for us."

Hull suddenly shouted loudly. "Varren! Kano . . . Rann . . . are you here?"

There was no answer from the crewmen whose names he had shouted.

"Wherever they are, they're not here," muttered Hull. "And I wish I weren't. What next?"

"Next, we wait," said Gordon.

They waited for more than an hour. Then the door opened with-

out warning. Outside it stood a supercilious young man whose black uniform bore in silver the design of the Mace.

"The insigne of Cyn Cryver," said Gordon. "I might have guessed it."

"The Count Cyn Cryver will see you now," said the young man. "You can walk, or be dragged."

He nodded toward the two men who stood further outside the door and who carried stunners in their hands.

"All right, we'll walk," nodded Gordon. "I've enough headache already."

THEY walked out into the hot sunlight, and along a street that had once been wide. But time and weather had cracked its pavement and seeds had lodged to grow into the feathery golden trees, so that now it was a path in a street-forest that they followed.

The corroded metal fronts of buildings showed through the foliage, silent and dead. And Gordon glimpsed a statue, the figure of a man in space-dress, looking proudly down the way from the middle of the street. It would be, he thought, the star-captain who had led the ill-fated colonists here, in the long-ago centuries.

Look and be proud, star-captain. All that you wrought died

long ago, and the last descendants of your people are the fugitive little hunted things in the forest which long mutational processes made of men and women. But be proud, star-captain, be happy, for your eyes are blind and cannot see . . .

They were taken into a building that looked like a municipal center. In a shadowy big hall, the Count Cyn Cryver lounged in a chair at a table, drinking a tawny-colored liquor from a tall goblet. He wore black, with his insigne arrogant on his breast, and he looked at Gordon with amused eyes.

"You kicked up quite a stir at Teyn but it seems we have you safe now," he said. He drank and put the goblet down. "A word of advice . . . never trust a coward. Like Jon Ollen, for instance."

A light burst upon Gordon. "Of course. That's why you were waiting for us. Jon Ollen is one of you."

Nothing else could explain it. The cadaverous Baron was a traitor, and it was a safe assumption that in Jon Ollen's ship had hidden that super-telepathic spy who had come to Throon.

Hull Burrel demanded harshly, "Where are my men?"

Cyn Cryver smiled. "We had no need of your men and ship and so they have been destroyed, as you will be destroyed when

we no longer have use for you."

Hull's first clenched. He looked as though he was about to jump toward the man sitting there, but the men with the stunners stepped forward.

"You will be examined later," Cyn Cryver said. "You are here now only because an old friend of yours wishes to see you. Tell their old friend that they are here, Bard."

One of the men went through a door at the rear of the hall. Gordon felt his skin crawling as he heard steps returning a moment later. He thought he knew what was coming.

He was wrong. It was not the cowed shape he feared that came into the hall. It was a man, broad-shouldered and tall, black-haired, tough-faced and keen-eyed, who stopped and looked at them smilingly.

"By God," said Hull Burrel. "*Shorr Kan!*"

"Oh, no," said Gordon. "Can't you see, it's some clever impersonation they've prepared. I saw Shorr Kan die, killed by his own men."

The man who looked like Shorr Kan laughed. "You *thought* you saw that, by stereo-vision. But you were deceived, Gordon. And if I do say so myself, it was a neat piece of deception, considering how little time we had in which to dream it up."

And it was the voice of Shorr

Kan, and also it was the voice of a dead man speaking in the darkness and saying, "So that's what he looks like!"

HE came closer and spoke earnestly, as one explaining something to a friend. "I was in the devil of a spot, thanks to you. Your damned Disruptor had shattered our fleet, and you were coming on toward the Dark Worlds, and my faithful subjects had got wind of it and were rioting in the streets. It was my neck, if I didn't think of something quick."

He grinned. "It took you all in, didn't it? I still had a few faithful officers, and when they sent out that stereo-vision message of surrender, they could show you poor old Shorr Kan, with a big fake wound in his side, putting on a death-scene I'm really proud of."

He burst into laughter. Stupefied, because he did not want to believe this and was beginning to do so, Gordon exclaimed, "Your body was found in the ruins of your palace!"

The other shrugged. "A body was found. The body of a dead rioter, who was my size. Of course there wasn't much to identify, for we fired the palace before we got the devil out of there, which little incendiary feat was blamed on my rioting subjects."

Gordon could no longer disbe-

lieve. He stared at Shorr Kan, at this man who had made himself master of the Dark Worlds and then, with their power, had almost shattered the star-kingdoms.

"And you've been hiding here in the Marches ever since?" he cried.

"Let me say instead that I've been making an extended visit to certain of my old friends here, among whom I number first the Count Cyn Cryver," said Shorr Kan. "When I heard you were among us, the Gordon whom I had never seen physically but whom I had known only too well . . . well, I had to give you greeting for old time's sake."

The insolent brass of the man, his complete, mocking, light-hearted cynicism, had not changed.

Gordon said, between his teeth, "Why, I'm glad you saved your neck . . . even though it's a comedown from being master of the League of Dark Worlds, to hanging on the coat-tails of a Cyn Cryver . . . still, it's better than dying."

Shorr Kan laughed, in honest enjoyment. "Did you hear that, Cyn? Do you wonder I admired this chap? Here he is, at the end of his rope, and he tries to slap my face in a way that'll make bad blood between you and me!"

"Look at him, Hull," said Gordon mockingly. "Isn't he the one

to put a brave face on it? Lord of the Cloud, master of the Dark Worlds, almost the conqueror of the Empire itself . . . and now that he's reduced to skulking in the Marches and mixing up in filthy plots with ragtag one-world Counts, he still stays cheerful."

Shorr Kan grinned, but Cyn Cryver got up and came over, looking at Gordon with livid hatred.

"I've heard enough of this," he said. "You've seen your old enemy, Shorr, and that's that. Shackle them to those pillars, Bard. The Lord Susurr will come this evening and examine their minds for what they may contain of value, and then they can be tossed on a dung-heap."

"The Lord Susurr," repeated Gordon. "That would be one of your creepy little allies from Magellan, would it? Like the one we disappointed so sadly when we foxed you at Teyn?"

The rage left Cyn Cryver's face and he smiled in a deadly fashion as Gordon and Hull Burrel were shackled each to one of the ornamental, slender metal pillars that ran in two rows down the hall.

"Even for you," said Cyn Cryver, "I had still a spark of pity, considering what will happen to you soon. But now it is gone." He turned his back on Gordon and told the young captain,

"Guard them until the Lord Susurr comes. It will be some hours, for the Lord likes not the sunlight."

Shorr Kan said brightly, "Well, lads, I fear it's goodbye now. I can see you're going to meet your end like men of courage. I've always said, 'Die like a man . . . if you can't find any way of avoiding it'. And I *don't* think you can avoid it."

Hull Burrel answered him with a low, heartfelt cursing. Shorr Kan turned his back on them, and went out with Cyn Cryver.

Bard, the young captain, remained with two men. They took up their posts in the entrance of the building.

HULL kept on swearing, utilizing profanity from a dozen different worlds. "That devil-born fox! All these years the whole galaxy has thought him dead, and he bounces up here to laugh at us!"

"It's all history now," said Gordon. "Of more concern is what happens tonight, when the Lord Susurr who does not like sunlight comes to visit us."

Hull stopped swearing, and looked at him. "What's the creature going to do to us?"

"I imagine you could call it mental vivisection. I think it will take our minds and turn them inside out for every scrap of

information we might yield, and that it'll be only two mindless wrecks who are killed later."

Hull shivered. After a little silence he said, with an age-old hatred edging his voice, "Small wonder that Brenn Bir blasted the Magellanian invaders out of the universe, that other time."

No more was said, for there was nothing to say. Gordon stood against the pillar, with the shackles cutting his wrists behind him, and looked out through the open doorway as the long hours of afternoon crept away. The orange rays of sunlight that cut down through the interstices of the mint-yellow leaves, slanted and shifted. The breeze ruffled the leaves like autumn aspens on faraway, long ago Earth. Beyond the trees the metal star-captain stood stiff and valiant, staring forever across his ruined city.

The guards lounged and shuffled in the doorway, glancing in now and then at the two captives. But Gordon could hear no sound of any activity from the dead city around them. What was going on here at Aar? That it was a focus for the intrigue that had hatched between the Counts and Narath Teyn and the aliens from outside, he had no doubt. But it could not be a vital center of their plot, or the treacherous Jon Ollen would not have named this place, and baited them to come to it.

Had Jon Ollen been setting a trap, not just for Hull and Gordon and their little ship, but for the main squadrons of the Empire fleet? Jhal Arn had said that those squadrons would come here, if they did not return with information. If that was so, he and Hull had really messed it up. Lianna would be proud of him when she heard of it.

He thought of Lianna, and how they had parted at Fomalhaut. He did not want to think of her, and he made his mind go blank, and in a kind of stupor watched the rippling golden leaves outside. The time slipped slowly by.

The gold dulled. Gordon woke from his stupor to see that twilight had replaced the sunlight. And the guards in the doorway were now looking nervously along the street. As the dusk deepened, they stepped farther away from the doorway, out into the street, as though they were doing everything possible to keep from being too near this room when the Lord Susurr came to do what he would do to the captives.

The hall was darkening, faster than the outside street. Gordon suddenly stiffened against his shackles. He had heard a sound approaching.

Something was in the shadowy hall with them, something that was coming softly toward them from behind them.

THE skin between Gordon's shoulders crawled. He heard the sound shift in position as whoever had stealthily entered moved softly around in front of them.

Then, close in front of him and silhouetted against the last twilight of the open doorway, he saw the profile of Shorr Kan.

"Listen, and keep your mouths shut," whispered Shorr Kan. "You'll be dead, and worse than dead, before morning comes unless I get you out of here. There's a chance I can do it."

"And why would you do a thing like that?" asked Gordon.

"He loves us, that's why," muttered Hull Burrel. "He's so full of lovingkindness that he just can't bear to see us hurt."

"Oh, God," whispered Shorr Kan, "give me a smart enemy rather than a stupid friend. Look, I may have only minutes before the cursed H'harn comes."

"H'harn?"

"What you call the Magellanians. The H'harn is the name they call themselves. The Lord Susurr is one of them and when he comes here, you're through."

Gordon did not doubt that. But all the same he asked dubiously, "If the creature is such a terrific telepath, won't he know that you're here right now?"

There was contempt in Shorr

Kan's answer. "You people all think the H'harn are omnipotent and omniscient. They're not. In fact, they're a bit on the stupid side in some ways. They *Do* have terrific parapsychical power, but only when they concentrate it on one object . . . they can't spread their mental power to encompass everything, and it fades out at a certain distance."

Gordon knew that from his own experience at Teyn, but he made no comment. Shorr Kan jerked his head around to peer at the guards who waited uneasily out in the dusky street, and then continued in a hurried whisper.

"I have to be fast. Listen. . . I've been here in the Marches ever since the defeat of the Dark Worlds. I figured that sooner or later I could manipulate these popinjay Counts the way I wanted to. . . set them against each other, get them to fighting, and when the smoke cleared away, Shorr Kan would be the king of the Marches. And I would have done it, too, but for one thing.

"The agents of the H'harn came from outside the galaxy, and made contact with Cyn Cryver and Narath Teyn and certain other of the Counts. The H'harn took a beating when they tried to invade long ago and it's taken them all that time to recover from it, but they're strong again and they still mean to come into our galaxy in a different way."

"What way?" asked Gordon.

"I don't know," answered Shorr Kan. "I'm not sure that even Cyn Cryver knows. I do know that the H'harn are preparing something big out there in the Megallanic Clouds, something against which our galaxy will be defenseless. What it is, I haven't the slightest idea."

He went on. "Those of the H'harn who have come here so far like Susurr here and others, are agents sent ahead to make alliance with the Counts and prepare the way for some kind of assault. The H'harn have assured Cyn Cryver and the others that they'll be given half the galaxy for their aid. And the bloody fools believe it!"

"But you don't?"

"Look, Gordon, did you find me an idiot when we fought each other in the old days? The H'harn are unhuman, so unhuman that they take good care not to show themselves bodily lest they scare off their allies here. Of course they'll use the Counts, and of course they'll brush them aside when they've succeeded in their plans, and what will their promises be worth?"

"About as much," muttered Gordon, "as the promises of Shorr Kan."

SHORR Kan chuckled briefly. "I asked for that. But no matter . . . I've had to guard my

thoughts carefully. The moment that that damned alien here got suspicious and probed my mind, I'd be through. I can't keep my guard up forever. I've got to get out of here. But one man can't operate a ship. Three men could. That's why I need you." His whisper became emphatic. "Give me your word that you'll go wherever I want to go, once we get a ship, and I'll free you right now!"

"Give our word to Shorr Kan?" said Hull. "That would be a really brilliant thing to do . . ."

"Hull, listen!" said Gordon swiftly. "If Shorr Kan double-crosses us the moment we're out of here, we'd still not be as bad off as when that alien gets through with us. Give him your word. I do."

The Antarian sullenly muttered, "All right. It's given."

Shorr Kan produced something from under his coat that glistened dully in the last shadowy light from the doorway. It was a heavy semi-circular metal hook whose cutting inner edge was serrated.

"I've no key to your shackles but this should cut them," he whispered. "Hold your hands wide, Gordon, unless you want one of them cut off."

He slipped around behind the pillar to which Gordon was shackled, and began sawing at the schackle. The sound seemed loud to Gordon's ears but the

shadowy figures of the guards out in the street did not move.

"Almost through," muttered Shorr Kan after a few moments. "If you'll. . ."

His whisper suddenly stopped. The sawing stopped and there was a stealthy sound of rapid withdrawal.

"What . . ." Gordon began, and then his heart throbbed painfully as he saw.

Out in the dusk-wrapped street still not as dark as the interior of this hall, the guardsmen were moving away, shrinking back. They went all the way back until their backs were against the building on the opposite side of the street.

And a cowed, robed figure of shimmering gray, not quite as tall as a man, appeared in the doorway. In complete silence, it moved, with the horridly fluid, gliding movement that Gordon had seen once before, into the darkness of the hall toward them.

Gordon's whole body stiffened involuntarily. He heard a sharp indrawing of breath from the Antarian, who had not looked upon one of the H'harn before. There was a moment in which the shadowy figure seemed to hesitate between them, and then the choice was made and it swayed toward Gordon and he waited for the blasting mental force to burst into his brain.

A shadow skittered in the dark-

ness, a low anguished hissing came from the H'harn, and its body swayed unsteadily aside. And against the last light of the doorway, Gordon saw Shorr Kan's silhouette as he dug the serrated hook deep, deep into the robed one's back.

In an access of revulsion, Gordon strained violently and the almost-severed shackles snapped.

He could not see clearly the nightmare that was going on now in the dark hall.

The H'harn seemed to be tottering away, mewling and hissing, as Shorr Kan stabbed and stabbed.

"Help me kill it!" panted Shorr Kan. "Help me . . ."

THERE was no weapon but Gordon grabbed up the chair by the table and rushed and struck. The mewling thing was down now.

Pain, pain, shot in terrible waves through Gordon's brain, coming consciously or unconsciously from the stricken alien. He staggered, went to his knees.

A wave of black agony swept over him and receded. He got up, shakily. He glimpsed the dark figure of the two guards in the street running now toward the doorway of this room. They hesitated, at the doorway.

"Lord Susurr?" called one, his voice high-pitched and shrill.

Shorr Kan's stunner buzzed in

the dark and the two men in the doorway fell.

"Saw Burrel's shackle, and hurry," said Shorr Kan hoarsely, handing him the hook that now was wet to the hilt.

As Gordon did so, he saw Shorr Kan stoop and tear open the robe of the huddled heap on the floor, but he could not see what the dead H'harn looked like. He heard a sharp sound from Shorr Kan.

The shackle parted. Shorr Kan hurried them toward the rear of the dark hall.

"This way. I *don't* think we have all the time in the world."

The little spaceport beyond the dead town lay dark and silent under the stars, when they reached it. Shorr Kan led them toward one small ship that lay apart from the others. Its black bulk loomed before them, and to Gordon it seemed oddly strange in outline, with thick vanes sprouting from its sides such as he had seen on no other starship.

"It's the ship in which the four H'harn agents came to this galaxy," said Shorr Kan, fumbling with the lock-catch. "The other three went to Teyn and other worlds, but the ship was left here with Susurr. From what I've heard, it's far faster than any ship we know of, so if we get away in it, they'll never catch us."

When they had got inside and the hooded lights in the control-

bridge were on, Hull Burrel uttered a grunt of astonishment.

"Well, don't stand there," Shorr Kan said impatiently. "You're the professional spacemen here . . . get busy and get us the devil out of here."

"I never saw a control-board like this," Hull objected. "Some of those controls don't seem to mean a thing. They . . ."

"Some of the controls are familiar to you, aren't they?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Then use the ones you know, but take off!"

Hull Burrel, his professional soul outraged by the sloppiness of such a suggestion, nevertheless took the pilot chair. It was far too small for him and his knees came almost to his chin as he poked and prodded and pulled.

The little ship went away from Aar fast, bursting out of the darkness of the night side of the planet into the brilliant sun.

"What course?" demanded the Antarian.

Shorr Kan gave him the bearings. Hull Burrel cautiously set them up, swearing at the unfamiliarity of the calibrations.

"I'm not laying a course, I'm just making an educated guess," he grumbled. "We'll likely pole up in the drift somewhere."

GORDON watched the lonely stars ahead, as they rushed on, and his shakiness left him.

"We're heading out toward the rim of the galaxy?" he asked, and Shorr Kan nodded. "Where will we swing back in, then?"

"We won't swing back in," answered Shorr Kan calmly. "We're going right on."

Hull swung around. "What do you mean? There's nothing beyond but inter-galactic space . . . nothing!"

"You forget," reminded Shorr Kan. "There are the Magellanic Clouds . . . the worlds of the H'harn."

"For God's sake, why would we want to go *there*?"

Shorr Kan laughed. "I feared this would be a shock to you. But I have your word, remember. It stands thus: the H'harn are preparing something out there, with which to strike at our galaxy. So . . . we go out on a reconnaissance. We find out what it is. And we bring back that knowledge so the star-kings can prepare against the H'harn. After all . . . isn't that the mission on which you two came?"

"But why should *you* risk your neck to save the star-kingdoms?" Gordon demanded.

Shorr Kan shrugged. "The reason is simple. I couldn't stay much longer with the Counts without betraying my suspicions of their H'harn allies . . . and the moment any H'harn saw that in my mind, I'd be dead. But I

(Continued on page 123)

Out in America's Dairyland, the battle raged between the forces of butterfat and the forces of the lower-priced spread. Then the smooth progress of the War-script stumbled upon union jealousies, the nation's sanity, and the Yellow Peril. For a really original, really sad story, proceed to Go and read

NO VINISM LIKE CHAU-VINISM

By JOHN JAKES

Illustrated by SCHELLING

UNION regulations did not make rising mandatory until reveille. Most of the troops were stirring by 0500, however. For Gregory Rooke, plagued by sleeplessness since an owl's hoot awoke him around 0315, this voluntary early rising of so many of the men bore out a certainty of his which had grown the past few days.

They had a happy army.

And once they finished the run, Rooke would be in a position to write his own contract for

the next one. Not bad for a product of the East Hampton slums who only ten short years ago, after flunking out of Pharmacy H.S., had been toting a string-rifle in the rear rank of the Finger Lakes Freedom Fighters, the dusty summer that saw the culmination of the Napa Valley Campaign.

Yet he was just a bit fearful. And, as usual, the boots hurt his feet.

Rooke's vaguely Lincolnesque face, one of his decided assets,

drew into thoughtful lines as he stood smoking at the flap of his small field geodesic. In five out of seven major campaigns, he had been fortunate to be on the winning side. And in all seven he had won distinction by giving the part more than it required, thus assuring himself a better part in each succeeding run.

Not all the hopefuls who entered this chancy business were so fortunate. Consequently he realized that when they had their final go today at the holdouts, the victory must be brought off with flourish. Like any man a bit on this side of forty, he was reasonably ambitious. He wanted the prestige that went with being able to demand, and get, a contract written his way.

Perhaps, then, the awareness of the stakes accounted for his nervousness. He stamped his field boots down hard in the sweet meadow grass to awaken himself, shake off the mood. Distressing, how the apprehensions wouldn't depart.

Or was his condition caused by something more direct and personal? He'd had several dreams about Mary Lu lately. Treacly, sympathetic dreams. Always upon awakening he was irritated.

In the HQ geodesic, the communications gear squawked. As Rooke watched two butterflies darting in the long grass down

beside the gray-silver sheen of Lake Oconomowoc, a seductive female voice honeyed the sweet-smelling air of the May morning.

"Hi there, soldier. This is your old pal Frannie with some pleasant wake-up music for you fellows out there fighting, bleeding and dying for the dairy trusts. Bleeding and dying uselessly, I might remind you. But more about that later. Here's our first tune."

Rooke's thin lips turned sour. A group—Rooke thought it was the UBM combo—pumped a *bossa electronica* into the air.

THROUGHOUT the encampment on the lake shore, activity quickened. Extras, bits and principals rolled out of their sleeping bags. A clank and clatter of mess and makeup kits created a counterpoint to the whine from the ordnance pool where the FFs revved their generators and spun their treads. For a moment, Rook's cynical professionalism, a hard-shell attitude produced by a decade as a working member of Fairness, melted. He was touched by something like a genuine loyalty to the troops, fifty thousand strong, and not a bad actor among them.

Well, not many.

Three hundred feet down the slope, a man in a trench cape beckoned inquiringly. Rooke hesitat-

ed. The man cocked his head. Why not? Rooke had no reason for uncertainty about the day's outcome since it had been programmed months ago by the big computers of Wm. Norris Industries/East, the government contractor for the creative part of this particular war. Still, his touch of doubt persisted.

Stage fright, pure and simple. Finale coming up. A trial run with the man standing down there beside the creepie-peepie would take the edge off.

Rooke was a figure of lonely, brooding splendor as he marched down the hillside, tapping his swagger stick against his leg. His epaulet stars gave off a dull glitter in the lightening gray air of morn. He passed the HQ geodesic and heard Fond du Lac Fran resume at the end of the musical selection:

"Gosh, fellows, are you really certain your heart's in this campaign? Think of your wives and kids, your moms and your sweet-hearts waiting back home—and worrying. Will you get home to them? Are you sure? You know our boys are ready to fight to the death. You know their battle cry. 'Better dead than the high-priced spread.' Do you really want to waste your lives, your young manhood, fighting against such dedicated veterans? Do you really want to oppose a cause you know deep in your hearts is just?

What, after all, has made America great? The genius for the synthetic. Do you want to fight the tital wave of history, fellows? Think about that, you soldiers of UDEF. Think about that as we play another—"

Among the UDEF troops past whose bivouacs Rooke walked now, there was understandably little interest in Fond du Lac Fran. Many of the men did have transistors going, but tuned to capture snippets of news from the area outside the Staging Zone. Only one here or there listened to Fran.

ROOKE was one of the few higher-ups privy to the knowledge that Fond du Lac Fran, like her opposite number on the UDEF side, Kenosha Kate (not broadcasting as Milwaukee Marilyn since the Liberation) was non-human, a patch job of syllables and phrases culled and re-edited from hundreds of innocuous taped interviews with the most provocative-voiced actresses of past decades. The UDEF soldiers who listened to Fran did so to appraise her as they would any professional. The troops understood that the broadcasts by the propaganda girls were aimed at the general public outside the Staging Zone. Rooke's status was indicated by his knowledge that Fran and Marilyn/Kate were tape drums.

"Thirty seconds, Pierre," said a sepulchral voice from the speaker grille in the side of the square metal creepie-peepie hovering above the ground on jets of air. The side of the creepie-peepie lens housing, as well as the cape and headphones of the man who had summoned Rooke, bore the logotype of the Government Broadcasting Company.

Pierre winked as Rooke came up. He answered the speaker grille:

"Right, Buster." Then, to his guest, "Morning, General."

"Hello, Pierre. What do you hear about the ratings?"

Pierre's blue eyes grew merry. "We're three points ahead of the Free BC and the Free BC isn't even in the park."

"Terrific."

"Hold on. Okay, Buster, I read you."

Pierre switched off the grille speaker. He adjusted his ear button. "Stand by, General." He waited, fixing his wry and weary repertorial smile in place. Rooke shifted restlessly as Pierre got his signal.

"This is Pierre Pell, your GBC field correspondent, speaking to you from a lonely, embattled hillside on the shores of Lake Oconomowoc, less than two miles from the scene of some of the bloodiest fighting yet encountered in this campaign. Yesterday, in a lightning advance from

Nashotah, soldiers of the United Dairy Expeditionary Forces pressed to within striking distance of the last major point of resistance of the AMMA irregulars, the headquarters of Burton Tanzy, former executive VP of AMMA. Casualties in the advance were heavy. To offer some comments on this climactic phase of the campaign, I have with me the commander of the UDEF striking force, Major General William ('Butterfat Bill') Smith."

The self-motorized creepie-peepie dollied back to include Rooke in a two shot. Pierre Pell continued smoothly:

"At the outset of the war five and a half months ago, the opposition had some caustic remarks about the nick-name of General Smith, then newly elevated to the rank of chief field commander for UDEF. They've learned that General Smith's name was not bestowed lightly."

Rooke peered straight into the lens. "I certainly hope they've learned that, Pierre."

"To you—and to all these men fighting and dying out here, General—butterfat is not a joking word, am I correct?"

"Yes, Pierre. Butterfat is the natural, wholesome way. And we're going to make the holdouts realize it, even if we have to jam the word butterfat down their throats with a stingrifle."

"Then I take it, General, your orders from UDEF remain the same?"

Rooke's nod was brief. "Exactly the same as they were when we liberated Milwaukee three weeks ago and our battalions captured the AMMA executive offices. The only terms acceptable to UDEF—the only terms under which we will deal with the American Margarine Manufacturers Association—are the terms of unconditional surrender."

RATHER good, Rooke thought to himself. Of course he had cribbed from the often-quoted unconditional surrender speech of the commander of the Finger Lakes Freedom Fighters, old Wesley Woodis, who was now retired at an Actor's Fairness Senior Citizen Ranch in Arizona. Wesley had stood in a light breeze in Golden Gate Park and vowed to the world that only the total surrender of the Napa Wine Cooperative, surrender terms to include a new contract with many binding East-of-the-Mississippi restraint of trade clauses, would be acceptable. Rooke had thrilled to Wesley Woodis' style, and never forgotten.

The war correspondent was talking again. "—erhaps you can give us some indication of the strategic situation this morning, General."

"Be very happy to, Pierre."

The main studio in Washington cut in a visual. Rooke saw it on the monitor panel on the front of the creepie-peepie housing. It was a simplified map of the area. Pierre explained, voice-over:

"General, I might point out to our audience of three hundred million Americans that we are now looking at a map of the primary battle zone. This territory has literally been devastated by some of the most savage fighting in the history of modern commercial warfare. On your screen, viewers, you are looking at an area of roughly two hundred and fifty square miles, comprised of three counties, Jefferson County to screen left, Waukesha screen center and Milwaukee screen right."

Pell winked at Rooke to indicate they would be back on camera momentarily. The main studio zoomed in on a large Maltese cross, indicating the UDEF position, and a circle which marked the city of Oconomowoc just a short distance westward. Pell's sudden tired smile indicated they were back into the two shot.

Can you outline the situation as it applies to Oconomowoc, General?"

"I can say this, Pierre. The AMMA forces would have saved themselves much bloodshed had they listened to the wiser heads on their executive board. The

board members counselled unconditional surrender at the time we liberated Milwaukee and captured them. One recalcitrant holdout, however—Tanzy—”

“Excuse me, General, but let me clarify. The General is referring to J. Burton Tanzy, the president of the Golden-Glo Margarine Company, and former executive VP of the AMMA board. Please continue, General.”

“Well, Pierre, as you know, Tanzy fled Milwaukee in a milk truck whose insignia had been forged to resemble that of the American Red Cross, which was in the process of delivering free processed milk tablets to men in the front lines on our side of Plankinton Avenue. Tanzy managed to slip beyond our perimeters and reach his plant in Oconomowoc. He has turned the town into a veritable stronghold of hysterical last-ditch resistance. The only men fighting with him, I might say, are misguided pseudo-patriots, escaped criminals and a large percentage of high-cholesterol degenerates. Barricaded inside the Golden-Glo factory, Tanzy has refused to surrender while still alive. Consequently we have moved westward from Milwaukee, suffering some heavy casualties from his guerillas, true, but determined to take Oconomowoc and bring Tanzy in. Either alive or dead. The choice is his.”

Now Pierre Pell had really warmed to the subject. “Just when do you anticipate taking Tanzy, General?”

Struggling to suppress a sudden thrust of shame at the hypocrisy of it all, Rooke put on a speculative, merciless expression. “By nightfall, Pierre.”

“Let me clarify for the viewers,” Pierre said in a hush. “You mean by nightfall today?”

Precisely what I mean. We—”

The correspondent cut in abruptly, scowling: “This is Pierre Pell, on the battlefield in Waukesha County, where we have been talking to—this is Pierre Pell returning you to the Early News.”

ANGRILY Pierre jerked off his headphones. He unscrewed his ear button, spat into it, “What the hell’s the matter, Buster? Couldn’t you give me five seconds for a signoff before—oh. Yeah? No kidding.”

Pierre turned to Rooke. The latter was already watching the peculiar scene which had appeared on the monitor. Flanked by another reporter in a GBC trench cape, a thin, peppery, white-haired little old man in fusty clothes was shown appearing in a doorway in a brick wall which bled all sides of the screen.

“Tanzy,” said Rooke in surprise.

"Yeah, Greg—uh, General. That's why they cut in," Pierre said. "Sorry."

"What's that Tanzy has in his hand?"

Pierre peered. "Looks like a gun. My God—a real one."

"Quick! Can you get the audio?"

The correspondent rushed to the hovering creepie-peepie console. He began twisting dials and throwing switches. A small cluster of UDEF troops began to form around the two men. The soldiers wore khakis with the embroidered shoulder patches of the Elzie Division. They looked mainly puzzled. Pierre muttered several uncomplimentary things about the hamming of his professional rival on screen.

The GBC reporter was standing beside Tanzy, talking animatedly. The president of Golden-Glo Margarine watched something out of the frame. His glitter-eyed fanaticism came across even on the reduced framework of the monitor. Pierre's hands flew as he tried to adjust the controls and screw in his ear button at the same time.

"Can't get it amplified, General. Tanzy's hollering something about no surrender. I can hear a little in the earpiece. And I'm also picking up some net traffic at the same time. It's got them all in a flap back east. This was unexpected."

How unexpected, Pierre Pell certainly could not comprehend. In his role as UDEF field commander, Gregory Rooke was one of half a dozen persons who had been allowed to see the Master Warscript, an Eyes Only document. He recalled nothing whatsoever in the final pages of the outline that resembled this macabre interruption. His uneasiness has come home to roost.

Three men in guerrilla coveralls entered the picture, hauling on a rope with obvious force.

Gradually the rope's far point of attachment became clear. A reluctant Guernsey was dragged into what was apparently the truck yard of the Golden-Glo plant.

Continuing to gesture wildly, Burton Tanzy advanced toward the cow. He paused for effect before putting the gun against the cow's unsuspecting skull and pulling the trigger.

Pierre Pell's cheeks were the color of oatmeal. "My God, he's gone crazy!"

"What the hell is happening?" Rooke said. "This isn't in the scr—"

He bit his lip before he uttered the damning word. The men around him were muttering uneasily. Abruptly Rooke shouldered a path out. He did not have to feign grimness or worry. For the first time in his acting career, he felt it.

The officers in the HQ geodesic were sweating. They stared stupefied at their blacked-out consoles of tiny lights. To Rooke's query, the baffled answer was:

"We just don't know, sir. Someone's cut the beams. We can't get a thing in or out of the producer's office in the Pentagon."

Somewhere to the west, Rooke heard gunfire.

The genuine kind.

II

ROOKE said, "Keep trying the Pentagon. I'll—" The responsibility choked him up a moment. "—have to send one of you to find out who's doing that shooting."

One of the officers, a Major, carefully studied his nails. "Uh, sir?"

"Yes?"

"Isn't it true that all contracts of principals require no participation in actual hostilities except in the event of accidental direct confrontation?"

Damn stage lawyer! Rooke recalled the clause. In the unlikely event of pseudo-combatants actually coming to blows, accidental or otherwise, the job of investigating the altercation, and the implicit risk of doing same, fell to the CO. It was one of the penalties, if you wished to call it that, of the leading role.

Rooke felt a moment of hot hostility toward his fellow thespians. Then it passed. His belief in the principle of the union contract was too deep and abiding to allow for more than temporary anger. Loyalty did not prevent him from being frightened, though.

"Has anyone seen Colonel Greene?" he asked.

Eyebrows lifted. Another Major coughed. Nervously Rooke amended:

"That is, I meant to say, Aaron?"

"Think I saw him down at the Mess getting his morning injection, sir."

"Uh, thanks. I'll try to get back quickly with some intelligence."

Rooke rushed down the hill. He regretted his last slip in the HQ geodesic. It revealed the extreme state of his nerves to his co-workers of lesser billing.

Enlisted men were signed, processed and paid by serial number. Therefore they used their real names, except when called upon for character bits. But the officers, because they were more frequently dealing with press people like Pierre Pell, knew each other both by real names and role names assigned for the campaign. Which name a man employed depended upon his proximity to the representatives of the news media. An

officer who slipped up and forgot his script name in a live interview, for example—he could not count upon his post-hyp block to help him since all the news people were aware of the realities and did not come under the heading “outsiders”—could be assured of never working in another commercial war again. So disconcerted was Rooke by what had happened that he had lapsed the other way. The lesser officers were probably wishing they had not auditioned for their parts.

ROOKE entered the O-Mess geodesic and bypassed the short queue waiting for morning vitamin hypos administered by the medico-nutritionists. He searched the O-Mess for Aaron Peskin.

A first-generation descendant of a United Kingdom family, Peskin was a first rate mimic. As a result, he had won hands down in competition for the role of Rooke's aide, Colonel Googie Greene, a bespectacled, gum-chewing, wisecracking officer from the borough of Brooklyn:

“—yeh, when I was just fourteen awreddy and loinin’ about da boids and da bees—”

“Googie, may I see you right away?” said Rooke, beside the table where Peskin was having his morning breakfast cubes.

“Jeez, we godda fire boinin’ or somepin’, General?”

“Outside, please. Quickly.”

Once into the light of the now-risen sun, Rooke explained the devastating developments of the last few minutes. Peskin's face lost its mugger's elasticity. When he spoke, the accent which he had been practicing in the O-Mess and which made him a favorite when he wisecracked with newsmen on the air, was gone, replaced by a light flavoring of his natural British:

“You mean, Greg old boy, we may have to expose ourselves to fire?”

“It's in my contract,” Rooke said heavily. “And as my aide, in yours.”

“Crikey! What happens to Operation Oconomowoc?”

“Issue orders to hold positions until we get back. Then meet me at the motor pool. And bring your sidearm.”

Peskin's sandy eyebrows quirked. “What do we do for ammunition?”

“The only place they have ammunition is in Washington. But maybe whoever is doing the shooting doesn't know that.”

Ten minutes later, Peskin came running across the pool yard. He hopped in the staff vehicle. He advanced the knobbed levers and shot the car forward on short airbursts.

The vehicle hovered past a line of sentries. Rooke could see that the men were perturbed, uncer-

tain. The cluster watching Pierre Pell's interview had doubtless passed the word that something unusual was happening. Rooke lounged uneasily in the tonneau while Peskin maneuvered the staff car through a clump of maple trees, then held it cautiously on the shoulder of a sunlit, four-lane, non-magnetized country road.

A light haze to the westward seemed to hang on the horizon, veiling the menace of inscrutable Oconomowoc from sight and comprehension.

"Not a thing stirring, old boy," Peskin said.

"Take it to the right. Slowly. We'll go half a mile and turn back. Unless we find something."

ROOKE sincerely hoped they did not. The tight-mouthed, death-defying commander of the UDEF forces was a role only. An image projected to three hundred million Americans who, in their packed vertical cities, found release in the emotional catharsis of fierce partisanship with the armies on either side of the various commercial wars which had uncontrollably wracked the U.S. (so it was made to seem) for more than twenty years.

Out of three hundred million, perhaps one hundred and fifty thousand principals, bits, extras, scripters, producers, newsmen

and members of ancillary service organizations such as The Combat Actor's Studio, were in on the secret of how the national sanity, at long last, was being precariously maintained. None of the hundred and fifty thousand, however, escaped the ministrations of the medico-hyp practitioners employed by the Pentagon before and after each run.

The technic was faultless. There had never been a single recorded case of a blabber who was able to talk about the realities to anyone clearly an outsider.

Naturally the commercial wars were excoriated in press and pulpit, and seemed ghastly happenings if you listened to the lip-service on the outside. Now, Rooke reflected as the air vehicle hissed along, this one was actually becoming ghastly, and he was on the inside.

"Bit of smoke curling up behind that ditch, old boy," Peskin murmured.

Glancing out of the bubble, Rooke saw it. The thin thread of black rose against the blue Wisconsin sky just beyond a deserted farmhouse. Civvies were always hastily evacuated at the eleventh hour to leave a Staging Zone clear. This action, billed as humane, was chiefly practical. No news ever left a Staging Zone except through authorized channels. The Pierre Pells

checked in every six months for post-hypnos, too. Thus those who might carry unauthorized news outside by shank's mare were rushed from the battle's path by the airtruck-load at the start.

Cautiously Peskin geared down the staff vehicle. Rooke tensed to jump out and investigate. Suddenly he had a vision of Mary Lu's face. Delicately heart-shaped, cornflower-eyed, passion-lipped.

The words were comfortable, easy to call to mind because he had read them aloud, jeeringly, several times during the arguments about conflicting careers which had preceded the divorce. Her personal flacks had ghosted them for a handout. Ironically, Mary Lu had turned up as his opposite number in this campaign. She was the third woman ever to land such a major role. "I can go to the top, Greg!" she had said. "I can! But not hitched to a quivering jealous baby like you. And once I do go to the top, I'll hamstring you, not to mention that ruthless, greedy union of yours!")

Rooke was glad that the Master Warscript had called for her surrender, as CO of the AMMA fighting forces, in the Battle of Plankinton Avenue. He hoped she was safe in her prisoner's compound back in Milwaukee. He realized he hadn't been so sentimental about her in quite a

while. But today's situation had brought him back to essentials.

"Look at that, would you!" Peskin whistled.

A UDEF-marked FF lay upside down on its turret on the other side of the drainage ditch. The treads reflected the sun. Peskin and Rooke approached gingerly. The stench of a gasoline fire penetrated the grassy heat of the overgrown meadow. a redbird flew past above. Rooke extended his hand.

"Force field off?" Peskin said.

Rooke moved his hand ahead further, into empty air.

"Think so. Come on."

The two officers worked their way carefully through milkweed and tall tasselled ryegrass, around to the far side of the smoldering FF. Rooke attempted to grasp one of the hand mounts to brace himself so he might peer up inside the gutted turret where a few flames still flickered. The metal was too hot to touch. Peskin let out a yell.

"Greg! They left one. Ours!"

Whirling, Rooke raced through the weeds. Peskin pressed a palm over his mouth. The sight was not pleasant.

Sprawled on his back over a rotted log lay a UDEF soldier costumed as a Tech Sergeant. A tiny blue plastic object was pinned to the corpse's blouse. Three messy, very final bullet

holes had turned to black clotted spots up near his left breast pocket.

"What do you suppose happened to the other two on the patrol?" Peskin asked.

"Must have taken them along."

"But Greg—sweet Elizabeth! The patrols aren't warlike."

"Only from the air." Rooke unpinned the plastic object. "Only when the networks train their cameras from their newsplanes. Then the patrols look warlike. They—" Rooke stopped in mid-sentence.

The significance of the object in his hand registered. It was a soft poly trinket, molded into the shape of a certain kind of headgear once worn by farmers' wives. For the first time, some of Rooke's confusion was cut away by sheer anger.

"Recognize this, Aaron?"

"Weren't some of the margies wearing them on their berets in Milwaukee?"

"Yes. The Bluebonnet Brigade."

Rooke shielded his eyes against the morning sun. He peered into the mysterious distance where Oconomowoc lay hidden.

"Aaron, it must be true. Tanzy has blown a fuse. Somehow, contact with the Pentagon producer has been blacked out and for one insane reason or another, this battle area has become a real—"

A rising whoosh interrupted him. He and Peskin spun. "Some bloke's trying to steal the bus!" Peskin squealed. The men went running.

The thief, however, was clearly unskilled in the operation of an air vehicle. As their boots slapped the concrete, Rooke and Peskin heard curses of frustrated confusion. A spiky-headed silhouette loomed inside the bubble.

"Take him on this side, Aaron, I'll get him from the other!" Rooke sprinted around the scooped cowl. The thief glanced up. As they pried up the bubble clamps, Rooks had the wild impression that they were about to lay hands on a scarecrow.

"Get the hell out of there, mate!" Peskin gave the would-be thief a biff in the ear. With a cry the man tumbled from the bubble, knocking Rooke to the pavement.

WHEN Rooke recovered, Peskin was covering both of them with his empty sidearm, upon whose butt his hand looked shaky and untrained.

As he leaped up and took two paces back, Gregory Rooke had the eerie feeling that he had seen the thief before. The thief was elderly. He wore once-natty navy blue coveralls bearing the tag of a leading mail order firm, a matching light blue shirt and high-top work shoes. His hair

was a wild, messy, grayed tangle.

The thief groaned, rolled over. Then his brown eyes popped wide behind his steel-rim spectacles.

"Greg! Aaron baby! Holy moly, are you a sight! I mean—it's me."

"Blooming spy for the AMMA doublecrossers—" Peskin began.

Rooke seized his arm. "No, hang on. It's our referee."

"That's right, that's right!" the thief exclaimed, on his feet and busy peeling gobs of putty from his cheeks.

Lumps of it came away from the side of his head, rendering his ears hairless. He stuffed his glasses, then his fright wig into the capacious coverall pockets. He stood before them twenty years younger, a thin, nervous man with hawk features and up-set eyes.

"Charlie Ripallo, you remember me, I was in Milwaukee over that rehearsal time dispute." From another of his pockets, he fished first a transistor radio, then an embossed, forgeproof plastic card which stated that he was indeed *Chas. C. Ripallo, Authorized Referee, Actor's Fairness (Central Div.)*.

Rooke said, "Aaron, you can put up the gun."

"Dunno, old boy. Certainly it's our union. But what's he doing way out here?"

"I can explain that," Ripallo said. He fingered his cheeks,

where several large bruises bloomed now the putty was off. "See these? I was out tramping the roads this morning in this damn rube get-up they handed me for this cornpone war, and three guys in an unmarked air-car jumped me and beat the hell out of me."

Rooke glowered, used his thumb. "The same kind who turned over our FF patrol, kidnapped two of our boys and shot a third one dead?"

"Shot!" Ripallo's sly Mediterranean face bleached. "Man, they're not playing Monopoly, are they? The guys who jumped me had themselves tricked up to look like some of Crazy Tanzy's guerillas. But I recognized two of them. Shep Swenson and Moe Gatch. Those names mean anything to you?"

Ransacking his memory, Rooke said, "Moe Gatch is chief referee for the other side, isn't he?"

Ripallo nodded. "He is to the union playing the AMMA crowd what I am to you fellas—the place you holler if something's not kosher in the contract. The only trouble is, those birds have altogether flipped. I heard 'em mumbling after they threw me out into a ditch—I was walking toward your camp when I saw the car standing empty, by the way. Anyway, I think those guys have got Crazy Tanzy hooked on

some kind of stim juice back there in Oconomowoc. And they're stockpiling real guns and ammo fast as they can."

Peskin swallowed. "You mean, old boy, this is turning into a—a genuine war?"

"Looks that way."

"Bloody margies!"

"You still haven't got it yet," Ripallo said. "We aren't up against the AMMA crowd as such. That's a front. Their part. This is a union thing. Us—Actor's Fairness—against them, ACVA. The drift I get is, somebody has decided right in the middle of the run that ACVA has been on the losing side in too many of these commercial wars. They mean to call a halt. Some rabble-rouser who's big in their union escaped from Milwaukee and is over there in Oconomowoc stirring them up."

A cloud passed over the sun. Rooke had a premonition, scowled. "Do you happen to know the sex of this rabble-rouser, Charlie?"

"That's a funny thing. It's a female broad."

"She wouldn't have been one of the principals for AMMA, would she?"

In his turn, Ripallo tumbled. "You don't mean top dog in this gig? Yeah, I did hear that. Also that she really hates Fairness' insides. Bet it's the same one you're thinking about."

Wandering over to the shoulder, Rooke leaned in the shade of a huge elm. He shook his head, which throbbed.

"I should have heeded the warnings." He glanced up, noticed both men watching him, explained, "In addition to choice remarks about my acting inability, the lady of whom I'm thinking once treated me to several long lectures, the substance of which was, Actor's Fairness is an octopus swallowing all the goodies, while the poor American Congress of Variety Artists, of which she was a patriotic and reasonably powerful member, being the Philly area governor, always got handed the less choice roles. Now, apparently, she's decided to do something about it. I'm speaking of Mary Lu Beth, also operating in this campaign under the name of Major General Lynn ("Old Leatherboots") Lucky. The CO for AMMA."

Thinking of the corpse over in the ryegrass, he added in a glum tone, "Also my ex-wife."

III

IN mufti and highly apprehensive, Rooks barely heard the reduction in the scream of the turbines. Scarcely ten minutes had passed since the commercial V-liner had risen from the Greater Milwaukee port. Now they were arriving.

That the situation was extraordinary was evidenced by a single fact. Rooke and Ripallo were the only passengers in all of the two hundred and forty cabin seats. High-ups in Fedair had lifted the customary ban on commercial traffic in or out of a Staging Zone so that the two men might attend the hastily-called bargaining session.

The Loop's two hundred story higher rises were coming into view below. Face pressed to the solex glass, Rooke wondered what the opposition hoped to gain by a meeting. Besides the chance to hurl insults, of course. In commercial war history, there was no precedent for what had occurred today.

Still, if they were talking, they would not be firing up near Oconowoc. Firing, for God's sake! Live ammo! The notion was both ludicrous and terrifying.

On the air trip down from Greater Milwaukee, the horizon had been aglow with lights all the way. The Metromichigania Area as the media hustlers referred to it was populated by some fifty seven million people. Even far to the eastward, on the water, the little bungalows on their pilings in the aqurbs combined their many tiny window lamps to turn the midnight bright as noon.

The V-liner began to descend more rapidly.

Rooke felt slightly out of contact with reality. Things had simply happened too fast.

Shortly after they had returned from their scouting expedition, a message came through from the producer at the Pentagon. The AMMA—correction, ACVA—resistance had momentarily turned off whatever device had been concocted to block the beams, and the single transmission which got through was from the producer. The message requested two representatives of Actor's Fairness to attend the 12:30 A.M. negotiations; Fedair clearance was available for the emergency flight.

Rooke had left Peskin in what both men somewhat hysterically referred to as command. He had ordered Peskin to conceal the corpse which was resting under a tarp in the staff vehicle. Hiding the corpse was necessary to prevent panic from setting in. When Rooke and Ripallo left at sunset, an uneasy silence prevailed over camp and countryside. Since ACVA had called for the negotiations, presumably the union could keep its unhinged dupes such as Tanzy in check. But there was no guarantee.

ROOKE shook Ripallo, who had a remarkable faculty for sleeping with his mouth open, even in trying times. A slender, coffee-skinned man carrying a

brief bag was the only person waiting for them in the windy light of the V-port atop the one hundred and eighty fifth floor of the Merchandise Monolith. Southeast, a massed light cluster in Soldier's Square Mile indicated a partisan war rally in progress.

"Hello, Putney," Rooke said as he came down the ramp. "Are you the one on deck tonight?"

Putney George nodded. He seemed tired. "One senior counsel from each union was invited. Those are ACVA's terms, incidentally. They certainly must have some aces showing up north. They're being firm, even dictatorial about the ground rules. You should have seen the snide 'gram they sent to the exec producer."

"Gonna be someone here from the Pentagon?" Ripallo inquired sleepily.

The lawyer nodded again. "If it's any consolation, fellows, I gather Washington is more upset than you are about the possibility of real conflict."

"It's distinctly more than a possibility," Rooke said as they entered the tube. He described the corpse. Putney George listened in disbelief, then tactfully raised the issue of Rooke's ex-wife:

"Can you handle her, Greg? Cool her down some? She's being very vocal."

"I couldn't handle her when we

were married. How can I now?"

Sounding annoyed, Ripallo said, "Well, you better think of a way."

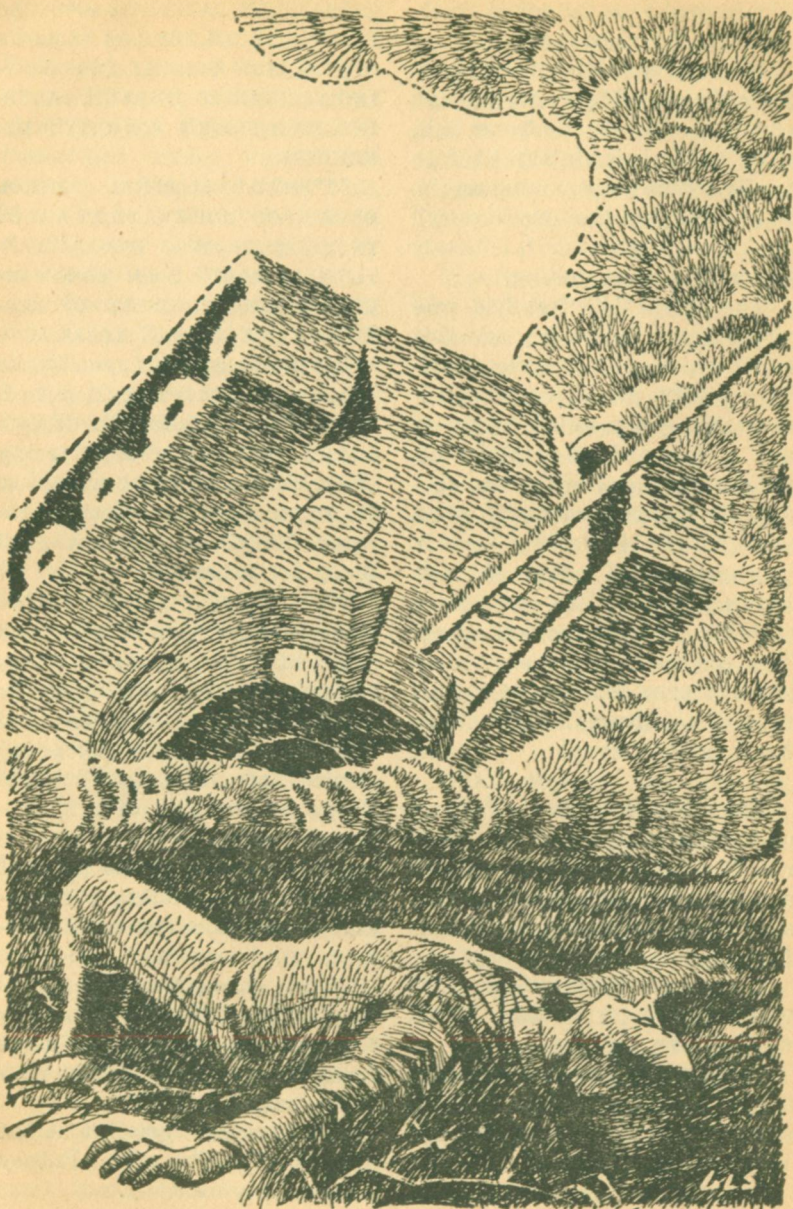
Normal pedestrian traffic flowed on the third street level as they left the tube and entered an aircab which the lawyer had waiting. Even this late in the evening, vehicular traffic was stupendous. It took them twenty minutes to travel the few blocks to The Conrad Cloud House, in whose Pizzicato Room the bargaining session was to be held.

On one clotted street corner where they were slowed to a standstill, a fiery-cheeked partisan orator was haranguing a crowd of cheering, stamping, whistling, applauding margarine supporters:

"—and I ask you, I ask you, folks," came the orator's amplified roar, "what is the fifth freedom? Tell me!"

"Freedom from cholesterol!" came the thundering reply.

IN an opposite lane, a sound truck with directional horns rolled past. It muffled the orator's speech with a special jingle in march tempo. Rooke felt a tingling but fleeting thrill of pride at the stirring music. He could hear little of the lyric, sung by a massed chorus, but he did catch the rhyming of "spoilers" with "corn-oilers" before the speaker incited his emotional au-



NO VINISM LIKE CHAU-VINISM

dience to charge the sound truck, overturn it and set it afire.

No luckless driver scrambled from the cab, Rooke saw through the rear window. A drone unit, then. In the brief interval before traffic commenced moving again, Rooke watched the attackers fall back, then begin to drift listlessly away. Most were smiling.

The cathartic effect had prevailed again. It was precisely this effect which tended to keep marital hostility, pre-teen sex experimentation, job mobility psychoses and a thousand other social ills within the range of the manageable. It was this cathartic effect with which his darling ex-wife was tampering. Indeed, she was tampering with the precarious stability of the national good. The union struggle might obscure or even destroy the usefulness of commercial wars. Curse her parochial eyes!

They finally arrived. Passing under the marquee of The Conrad Cloud House, Rooke noticed a newsflash strip jerking its message along the facade of a building opposite.

—ALL COMMUNICATIONS WITH WISCONSIN BATTLE AREA STILL COMPLETELY CUT OFF.

***YELLOW'S SCORE IMPRESSIVE GAINS ON NEARLY ALL FRONTS FOR 15TH STRAIGHT WEEK. PEKING PREDICTS VICTORY.

***SIEGE OF SAMARKAND EN-

TERS 958TH DAY WITH SPORADIC FIGHTING BOTH SIDES AS YELLOWS UNVEIL NEW SCHEME FOR GROWING VEGETABLES IN SAND, INSURING FOOD SUPPLY FOR CITY'S DEFENDERS.

***FIELD MARSHAL NIKOL GRIMINSHOVICH KILLED AT AGE 37 IN KREMLIN FALL. FAMED "BATTLEFIELD BABY" BORN TWO MINUTES BEFORE OUTBREAK OF RED-YELLOW CONFLICT 37 YEARS AG—

Ripallo tugged his arm. Rooke followed the other men. Bemused, he had been watching the flasher stories without really seeing them. He was losing his alertness. He must make an effort to recover. Toughness, that was all Mary Lu venerated.

The men rode silently to the ninety second floor. Rooke tried to get his field commander image back in shape by scowling at the tubes closed semicylindrical door. An ominous-looking group awaited them inside the Pizzicato Room, to one side of a green-draped table.

A man seated at the head of the table rose, snuffing out a cigar in the table chute. "Gentlemen, good evening," said the man, as armed guards supplied by the Hotel Security Director slammed and barred the doors from the outside. "Was your flight, uh, pleasant?"

"We have no comment at the present time," said Putney George automatically.

THE hostility in the meeting room was thicker than thick. Representing the American Congress of Variety Artists, and all glaring, were three persons. A mummified senior counsel. A slovenly, adder-eyed fat man, Moe Gatch. And in the center, slapping her riding crop lightly on the baize, Mary Lu.

As Rooke assumed his seat, he twitched the corners of his mouth to indicate that her showing up in her tight-fitting, star-shouldered battle jacket, battle trousers and battle boots, all of glossy black leather, was a bit much. No response. He might have been smiling at a pretty stranger, for all the expression on Mary Lu's—dammit, he had to admit it—poignantly remembered face.

After taking two capsules and screwing back the cap of the vial and giving a slight belch, the man at the head unfolded a blue-covered sheaf of papers. The mel-low yet commanding voice which had made Desmond Cecil-Vidor Thatcher one of the most successful senior producers in the Pentagon now carried a faint quaver.

"Gentlemen and, un, ladies, I have before me a brief prepared by senior counsel for the American Congress of Variety Artists in which certain demands are enumerated, together with a declaration that unless these demands are fully met by certain

of us gathered here tonight, the contractual players currently engaged in Production Forty-Two, Sub-agreement Two, will foment and carry out armed hostilities against the contractual players represented by Sub-agreement One, the purpose being to force the—"

Ripallo lunged up, glaring at Moe Gatch. "We already seen some of your rotten hostilities. We can play that game too!"

Gatch sniggered. "With that bunch of uniformed pansies you got? Pfaugh!"

"For God's sake, Charlie, sit down," whispered Putney George.

Ripallo, however, would not be silenced, "Mr. Producer, Greg Rooke here and I, we found this dead actor this afternoon, shot to death by some of these terrorist goons who are now pretending to sit down here like decent citizens and—"

While Ripallo was orating, Rooke saw his ex-wife blink. Then she bent to whisper in Gatch's ear.

The obese man waved her question away as too ridiculous. Mary Lu slapped her crop on the table. The noise startled Ripallo. His mouth open in mid-defamation, he did not recover quickly enough. The stars on Mary Lu's epaulets caught the light from the ceiling panels as she rose and overrode Ripallo's feeble comeback with her smoky voice:

"Mr. Producer, ACVA categorically denies these ridiculous charges by the representative of Actor's Fairness."

This time Rooke himself felt prodded. "Now listen here, Mary Lu—"

"My name," she said, "is Miss Beth to you."

"Your name is Mary Lu Woliczniski if you want to be painfully truthful about it!"

"You foul, absolute son of a—"

The ACVA counsel pounded the table. "Contempt citation! Contempt citation!"

"—and if you think you're so good at denying the evidence of your own damn eyes," Rooke was shouting, "then you come up to our camp and take a look at the dead man we've got there. Right now take a look at these marks on Charlie Ripallo's face which were inflicted in a beating by the same people, I don't doubt, who shot that man of ours and kidnapped two others. I mean Mr. Gatch and his cronies."

DESMOND C-V. Thatcher hammered for order. Mary Lu whispered to Gatch a second time. The latter bellowed, "I tol' you, babydoll, I was cooped up all afternoon with one of them little cuties from Tanzy's processing line. She was showing me her, uh, pat slicing mechanism."

The referee's lecherous leer substituted a lesser crime for a

greater. Mary Lu bit her lip while the producer continued to plead for order.

Though she was a willful little twist, hot tempered and ambitious as hell, and though Rooke disliked her actively at the moment, yet deep within his heart he found himself harboring a trace of gooey sadness over their parting.

Mary Lu finally said, "The word of Mr. Gatch that these accusations are false is sufficient evidence for me, Mr. Producer."

"This is the most outrageous travesty—" began Putney George.

"Oh go take a flying—" began Moe Gatch.

"Everyone, damn it," Thatcher suddenly bawled, "calm down!"

Tense silence.

Thatcher brushed back his magnificent white hair with two palms, glanced from face to face reprovingly, said:

"I think this immature outburst on all your parts indicates that you fail to recognize the gravity of the situation. We are dealing not with partisan complaints, but with the very tissue of national mental health. I will not demean your intelligences—" His glare at Gatch indicated that that gentleman might be an exception. "—with a recitation of the difficult straits in which our nation—and remember, we are all Americans—found itself at

the end of a decade of prolonged armed conflict between the Reds and the Yellows. We were at peace. We were prosperous. We were not involved directly in the major conflict. Yet our domestic problems, in this ostensibly idyllic time, become mountainous. I will not insult you with statistics on the rising crime rates, divorce rates, insanity rates, and the scores of other social difficulties which had to be forcefully met to prevent this nation from becoming a jungle devouring us all."

Ignoring his notes, Thatcher continued fluently and with increasing emotion:

"We can all be proud that it was our profession, the theatrical profession, which offered the solution. We were the people both technically and temperamentally equipped to provide our restless, multiplying population with the kind of emotional diversion and release which thinkers more profound than I had reluctantly concluded was necessary to maintain the public order in our country. Your government and mine recognized this when it secretly called in the presidents of those two great corporations, The Dr. Landers Camera Company and Yellow Box, Ltd., and won their agreement to a limited, pre-planned conflict between rival work and sales forces."

Listening, Rooke once more felt a stir of patriotism. Probably to keep them mindful of the structure which unrestrained union feuding could so easily tear down, Thatcher sketched in the details of the evolution from street riots between actors disguised as photographic blue and white collar workers to battlefield combats between actors playing members of the private security forces hired by gigantic corporations and trade associations. Thatcher spoke with much verve and passion. Cynically, Rooke supposed he was eager to settle this because he was rumored about to step up to a cabinet post—either Secretary of Internal Well Being, the big one, or Secretary of News Management. Rooke watched his emotionless wife as he listened.

"—only a complex and super-secret alliance between the entertainment and communications industries, between the highest echelons of big business, the American College of Medico-hypnotists and your government, prevented the great population of America from becoming a neurotic, distracted, frustrated, purposeless—"

"Mr. Producer," Putney George interrupted. Thatcher glowered. "I respectfully suggest that we deal not with historical generalities but contemporary specifics. Admittedly we have a

critical and unprecedented situation here. As senior counsel for Actor's Fairness, I am empowered to suggest that the President, as a condition for negotiations, immediately neutralize the present Staging Zone by dispatching federal troops—"

Opposition counsel wheezed, "What federal troops?"

"Surely," Putney George said, "there must be some federal troops left in the United States. They can't all be assigned overseas."

"I'm afraid they are," Thatcher said. "As a representative of the Joint Chiefs of Production, I am in a position to know that, except for callow trainees, our entire military manpower is committed to perimeter defense of the Russo-Chinese conflict zone."

"The suggestion is ridiculous anyway," said Mary Lu. With a malevolent glance in Rooke's direction and an okaying nod from Gatch, she continued, "We don't need gobbledygook and government intervention. All we want is a fair shake."

"Like what?" Ripallo asked.

"A guaranteed agreement that members of ACVA will be on the winning side in all future commercial wars at least fifty percent of the time."

Rooke, Putney and Ripallo exchanged thunderstruck looks.

"We will never agree to that," said Putney with firmness.

"Then," said Mary Lu, slapping her riding crop against her leather breeches, "all we are doing here is wasting our damn time. Gentlemen?"

The ACVA delegation got up and walked out.

Producer Thatcher breathed, "Oh my God," called a ten minute recess after the fact, and swallowed another brace of pills for whatever other ills were contributing to the pained and horrified expression on his face.

IV

THATCHER rushed around the table to Rooke's place.

"Greg, this ball is in your court. Can you go after her? She's leading them by the nose."

"I'm not so sure of that."

"What?"

"Did you notice how she seemed to be taking all her cues from that Gatch?"

"No, frankly I didn't. The point is, Greg, we must get them all back here. At least to sit down and finish the discussion so we know where we—"

Normally a fellow with the best of tempers, Putney George had been irritated in just the proper spot. He interrupted in a shout:

"Mr. Producer, Actor's Fairness will never, I repeat, never, submit to that ridiculous fifty-fifty proposal."

"Shouldn't you at least contact your president and your board before you make such a flat assertion?" Thatcher fired back.

"Mr. Producer!" Putney rushed on. "That Actor's Fairness is more often than not chosen to fulfill the winner's role is vivid testimony that we would be fools to negotiate on that point. Vivid testimony, I say, that ours is a craft union of professional artists, not floozy industrial show hoofers, jugglers, trampolinists, exotics and other mediocre talents unable to register any emotion save the stereotyped leer of the evil—"

"Now I kind of resent that, Putney," Rooke found himself interrupting in turn. "Mary Lu may have a nasty temper, but she's a good actress, not a floozy."

"Who's side ya on?" Ripallo cried.

Thatcher said, "We'll talk about it later. The problem now is to keep talking, period."

Hastily he summoned one of the armed guards. "Pick up your spyphone and peep those people who just walked out. I assume they haven't left the hotel. I want to know where they are."

The guard rushed from the room. Thatcher turned toward the three men, all arguing at the top of their lungs, and in a still louder voice demanded that they shut up. They did.

"Now, Greg," said the Penta-

gon representative puffily, "If they have not left the building, I'm putting it up to you to go after them, especially your wife, and bring them back to the bargaining table."

"Ah," Ripallo said, gesturing, "she's got those jerks brainwashed."

GREGORY Rooke had a sudden impulse to punch Ripallo in the nose. He refrained, both because temper would not help, and because he suddenly felt compelled to learn who was actually in control of the ACVA group.

Mary Lu seemed the spokesman, true. Yet her whispered colloquy with Moe Gatch regarding the shot actor cast some doubt on her full awareness of what was happening. Rooke would have bet money Mary Lu had not been dissembling. He knew her well enough to know when she was performing, and when not.

He also felt a certain sudden and inexplicable urge to vindicate her.

Or himself?

Either way, he had thought enough of her at one time to propose. Ripallo and Putney George had already dumped her into a category with that oaf Gatch. He felt compelled to discover whether this was so, and the Mary Lu of yore no more. He hoped not. To Thatcher he promised:

"Mr. Producer, I'll do my best."

Shortly the armed guard buzzed. Thatcher lit up the panel for half a minute, then hustled back to the table, a tiredly hopeful smile on his face.

"Evidently it's as I suspected. The walkout was a bit of a bluff, gentlemen. All three adjourned to the cocktail bar on forty four. They're obviously waiting. It's our move. Go to it, Greg."

The tube ride downward seemed endless. Two commercial travellers off for a late flight were commenting about the mysterious shortage of war news from Wisconsin. Lest they recognize his face, Rooke quickly drew out his shades and donned them. Consequently, he could see virtually nothing when he stepped beneath the large sign suspended at the end of the arcade on the forty fourth floor. The sign's lettering, formed of glowing tubes, penetrated the green darkness produced by his glasses—*The Walt Bisbee Heirs present THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF LIBATIONS*—but for a moment nothing else did. He whipped off the shades again and peered around in the gloom.

That the bar concession was almost a huge hall had been cleverly disguised by a variety of divider panels and animation exhibits secluded in nooks and subtly lighted. As Rooke passed

one such while searching the tables, an electronic Omar Khayyam with an Anglo-Saxon countenance rolled forward on casters, was hit with a spotlight and began to recite verses from *The Rubaiyat* to music. Rooke was so tense, he half swung to take a punch at an imagined adversary before he caught on.

"Why, it's the General. The General looks a little nervous, don't he, counsel?"

The voice issued from a dark cove booth. Rooke stepped closer. Moe Gatch had spoken, in an insulting tone. The attorney kept his peace. There was a third drinking globe hovering half an inch off the table, but Mary Lu was absent.

"I'll deal with Miss Beth, if you don't mind, Gatch."

"Suit yourself. Question is, will she deal with you?"

ROOKE checked a sarcastic comment. Though Gatch might be a power in ACVA he was clearly a hooligan. Baiting him would serve no purpose. Grubby gangster! He looked as untidy physically as he clearly was mentally. Beneath his sport cape Gatch wore an upper of a cheap, flashy lemon shade, fitting tightly around his neck where it appeared to darken to a deeper ring of the same hue. How did Mary Lu become involved with seedy sorts who did

not even bathe? Rooke wondered, facing around.

Just then Mary Lu emerged from beneath an electronic wall figure representing Maude Frickert tipping from her cane; Maude's left hand held a sign animated by polarized light, bearing the legend *Gals*. Rooke was gratified to see that his ex-wife had had the good sense to don a mufti cape and shades. The cape was long enough to conceal all but the tips of her military boots. That was all they needed—recognition of General Lynn Lucky by the patrons.

As soon as Mary Lu saw him standing in her path to the table, she switched her course. She marched to the bar and took a stool beneath an animated wall display featuring an electronic figure with curly hair and pince nez. The figure periodically chanted a chorus of *The Maine Stein Song* through a megaphone.

The back of Mary Lu's cape remained snobbishly turned toward Rooke as the latter hitched himself onto the bucket chair beside hers. He adjusted the levarod so the air column lifted him a bit higher, to proper drinking position. He pressed a mixing stud. He slid a bill into the adjacent slot and waited until the highball revolved into serving position before he spoke.

"Am I allowed to buy you one,

Mary Lu? Or are you just resting?"

As Rooke peeled the polyfilm from the top of his globe, Mary Lu swivelled around.

"I told you, Rooke. It's Miss Beth. I told you that. I am sitting here because you were so rude as to stand directly in my path."

Rooke looked rueful. "Miss Beth. Hell, that sounds ridiculous between people who have—well, anyway." A surreptitious glance. No one was within three stools. "How did you happen to pull that escape in Milwaukee? You could have gotten hurt."

"Listen to my ex faking worry, would you! Greg sweetest, you certainly weren't so solicitous when we were married. Your appeal is phony, dear. As always, your acting stinks. May I ask why you followed us?"

"Followed you," he corrected, his temper approaching the boil. "Gatch and that mummy lawyer you can have."

"Was it to softsoap us into more bargaining under impossible terms?"

"Why did you and your friends hang around here?" he countered slyly. "To give our side the opportunity to grovel while we persuaded you to come back?"

Mary Lu bit her lip. "Well, the strategy wasn't my idea. Gatch's. He's so obvious. I was prepared to walk all the way out."

"Mr. Gatch, along with some

friends, beat up Charlie Ripallo and possibly shot and killed at least one member of Actor's Fairness."

The actress guffawed in lady-like fashion behind her hand. "Oh, stop."

"Mary L—Miss Beth, I mean it. A man is dead."

"But Gatch swore—" She depressed a stud. "I believe I will have a drink. But I'll pay for it myself. Greg, you're lying in your teeth, just the way you lied about that canteen chippy when we were married and you were a looie in Romley's Raiders in the Invasion of Detroit. You stood on your flat feet—how are your flat feet, by the way?"

MOROSELY he drank his thiamine-laced highball. "Still flat. They still hurt like hades in combat boots. Concerning that so-called canteen chippy, I did not lie and she was no chippy, she was geriatric, practically. You'll refuse to believe this too, but I was worried about you when I heard you had escaped."

"I'll bet you were! You admit I'm a real threat!"

"Not that way, dammit. Worried you might—get hurt. How did you manage it?"

Briskly Mary Lu downed her drink in a nonstop gulp. Rooke was tempted to say something about living the part of the colorful lady commander, refrained.

"That, my bucko," she told him finally, "is my little secret. But I'll be glad to tell you the why. I was enraged by the behavior of those Milwaukee compound guards. All, I might point out, members of Actor's Fairness."

"Heck, you know either union accumulates some scum among the extras, Mary Lu."

No eruption anent the name. He felt he was getting through. More astonishing, he was oddly gratified that he was. His suspicious side cautioned care, wariness, and tried to mentally catalogue all the fierce differences leading to the divorce filing. Somehow, his face inches from hers at the noisy musical bar, the catalogue would not fall together.

Mary Lu's ripe lower lip was quivering.

"You should have seen this fat swine of a guard, Greg. Immediately he discovered I was a district governor of ACVA, do you know what he did? He and a bunch of plug-ugly pals surrounded me. They began buzzing me with their stim prods. Not enough to hurt, not then. This leading swine reached into his credit case, pulled out his Actor's Fairness membership card and made me kiss it. Kiss it! The plastic tasted horrible. You know I've always felt you people in Fairness believed you were so damn superior, and that one cal-

lous act by that brute in Milwaukee showed me. Frankly, it set me off."

Now Rooke sympathized, his own anger directed parallel to hers. "Callous isn't the word for an act like that. What you should have done was screamed for the union referee."

"But darling, I knew the union referee, Moe Gatch, would be getting ready for the finale out around Oconomowoc, don't you see?"

"Of course! Naturally you'd read the—" He lowered his voice. "—Warscript."

"Yes, and seen the same humiliating role forced upon ACVA people one more time. When I told that pork-jowled guard that I wanted him to 'gram the referee, he laughed. I tell you, there's a lot that goes on behind the back of the stuffed shirts in the Washington front office."

"I can certainly see that." Rooke nodded. "Something ought to be done."

"Exactly. I did it. I won't tell you details, because that would incriminate some people on your side. But it seems there's a tidy little under-the-ledge trade in special favors going on. You know the type of situation. A family emergency arises but the contract says you can't leave until the engagement ends on such and such a date. Well, doors can be opened. They were for me, in

return for a perfectly barbarous percent of some residuals. But I made it to Oconomowoc, right enough—was within a mile of your campsite once, too. I filed my complaint with Gatch, which is all I intended to do before giving myself up. And then, Gatch flabbergasted me."

"How so?"

"He said he too was fed up with ACVA getting second choice all the time, and why didn't we do a bit of impromptu scriptwriting? At first—" Mary Lu was not all martinet; the one drink she had swigged was beginning to render her speech slurry now and then. "—I had some, you know, patriotic reservations. Then I thought—oh, what the hell? Fairness has rubbed our noses in it long enough. Mr. Gatch is not as dense as he might look or act, Gregory. He opened his portfolio and showed us some schematics for a contraption to neutralize the outside communications beams, seal off the area while we made our demands. And he had a decanter full of stim juice, one drop of which would make that old hot-head, Tanzy, putty. It certainly did. Gatch was the one who called for these negotiations, too. But understand." Stiff upper lip, determined glance. "I was all for it. He seemed to have several friends with him, all equally enthusiastic about the cause, and before

very long, we were rewriting the script."

OVER his shoulder, Rooke noticed with some slight alarm that the ACVA counsel still sat with his drink, but Gatch had left the booth and disappeared.

"Whose idea was it to have Tanzy shoot the cow?" Rooke asked.

"Gatch's. I thought it was coarse and cruel myself. But effective."

"Then you actually haven't engineered what has happened, Mary Lu, Gatch has?"

"Well, I guess you could shay—say—" She flicked at the collar of her cape, struggling to maintain an air of composure. "Damn you, Gregory, I haven't had a drop shince—since I went into the field. And no dinner tonight, either. Here you've gone and gotten me all gooey and plastered, made me tell—"

The sudden appearance of two bleached spots in Mary Lu's cheeks caused Rooke to stiffen. Mary Lu's pretty eyes attempted to focus somewhere past his shoulder. He spun his bucket just as Moe Gatch popped out from behind an ornamental pillar across the aisle, reaching for Mary Lu's throat region:

"I heard a few things, General. I think you're talking too damn mu—what's wrong with you, Rooke, ya chump?"

Cold in his middle, Rooke pointed.

"The question is, Gatch, what's wrong with you?"

The shaking tip of Rooke's index finger indicated the place where, by virtue of Gatch's energetic lean and reach as he attempted to throttle Mary Lu, the collar of his lemon-colored upper pulled away from his throat, exposing again the saffron-colored ring Rooke had noticed earlier. This time, however, there was no trick play of lights and reflections to account for it:

Blundering back, Gatch whipped his left hand up to his collar. He checked the move too late. "Who are you?" Rooke shouted, and leaped.

His fingers dug in savagely at Gatch's collar line, ripped—

A HEARTBEAT later, strips of something like human flesh and hair hung from Rooke's right hand. Disbelieving, he turned the microthin molded material over. He saw the true nature of the stuff on the obverse—it was an undyed, undoctored off white color, with a fine pattern of tiny trademarks in parallel lines. The pattern was unbroke except for the breathing apertures and other openings.

Whipping the material up to his eyes, Rooke read one of the trademarks:

PLIO-MA-KUP®
*A Mondanto Chemical
Substance*

(Max Vector Division)

"God in heaven!" came Mary Lu's breathy voice. "Greg, he, he's a—"

The apparition in front of them whipped out a genuine pistol from somewhere beneath its cape. The half of the apparition's face yet unpeeled belonged to Moe Gatch.

The other, authentic half, totally hairless and of a deep saffron hue, belonged to a high-cheeked, glittering-eyed and sinister Oriental.

"You will pay for your addled behavior, Miss Beth," hissed the apparition, grabbing Mary Lu by the arm and wrenching her to his side.

Stupefied, Rooke swung a fist. A bar steward rushing from among the tables to investigate the nature of the fuss inadvertently ran between Rooke and the Oriental just as the latter's gun went off. The steward reeled, shot to death. Only the man's accidental intervention saved Rooke's life.

Dragging Mary Lu and scattering tables and glassware behind, the Oriental ran into the arcade and disappeared into a tube. In pursuit, Rooke slammed back from the tube's semicylindrical door as it rotated shut. He shook with shock. He had almost

had his hands clipped off at the wrists by the shutting door.

"I don't understand this," came the voice of the ACVA counsel who had chased Rooke into the arcade. "Who was that? Where is the real Mr. Gatch?"

"Probably dead. Keep quiet." Rooke bowled past him, back into the lounge. He indexed the button for the Hotel Security Staff, next put in a call to the civil police. Then he and the unstrung counsel took the tube back up to the Pizzicatto Room.

As there were no indicator lights above the entrances to the tubes, Rooke did not know whether the Oriental had gone up or down. He did not know where to begin looking for the Oriental and Mary Lu either. The Security Staff would know the hotel better anyway. But he was deathly afraid for Mary Lu's safety, which now, inexplicably, mattered very, very much. He prayed the Staff would get their licensed spyphones to work peeping promptly.

IN an hour a representative of the Staff dolefully announced that the missing pair was nowhere in The Conrad Cloud House. Thatcher sent for a multi-channel set which was installed in a corner of the site of the aborted negotiations, and the group spent the remaining hours of the night sucking on caffeine

cubes and waiting for ominous Bulletins.

None came.

At four, the civil police reported that the pair had evidently escaped the city. Thatcher used his influence to contact Fedair's top echelon. Yes, an unidentified V-craft had slipped out of the Chicago pattern at approximately 2:48 A.M., heading northwest.

"Oconomowoc!" said Rooke in a ghastly whisper.

"—expose at last the rotten hypocrisy of your own leaders, from first-hand, personal experience in—"

Bleary-eyed, Rooke turned towards the noise. On the top left monitor of the panel of nine screens, a bizarre scene was unfolding. A wild-eyed, disarrayed man on a soapbox was haranguing a crowd on a street. Thatcher frantically fooled with the gain until he got the volume so that he, Rooke, Putney George, Ripallo and the ACVA attorney who had been weeping intermittently for several hours, might hear.

"I know that face," Thatcher was saying as he watched the scarecrow image on the monitor.

"Which channel is carrying that?" Rooke said. "Where does it come from?"

"This is the hotel's own internal ID channel, Greg. The camera is trained on the main entrance, street level."

"Get him down, get him down, you people!" a civil policeman at the fringe of the pictured crowd was crying.

"Push him off the box! Push him off!" other voices chorused.

"—know what I'm talking about!" the orator exclaimed, windmilling his arms in excitement. "I've been there! It's all a fraud, a sham, these commercial wars. Nothing but fakery!"

The man had the same coked-up look of runaway insanity—as the man himself had observed on the screened face of J. Burton Tanzy at dawn. Rooke's mind reeled under the impact of this latest turn of events.

The screaming muckraker on the soapbox was Pierre Pell.

V

GREGORY Rooke gripped the gasketing at the hatchway edges and held on, arms throbbing, to keep from being blown out. A chron dial high on the control panel and seen at the oblique through his shatterproof goggles showed the time as 09:17. An adjacent indicator registered the chopper's altitude at nine hundred and fifty feet and dropping.

A quartet of smokestacks, the construction-grade high-impact material carefully scored and soot-sprayed to give a quaint and charming effect of ancient brick,

seemed to rush at the chopper with frightening speed. Permanently radiating vertical letters on each stack spelled out identical messages:

G
o
l
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G

The cheery yellow signs somehow lent a sinister cast to the wide, innocent blue arc of Wisconsin sky beyond.

Rooke was surviving on sheer tension energy alone. His belly hurt fiercely. He was totally unskilled in matters of this kind. Of course he was willing, considering Mary Lu's plight.

Thatcher and Putney George had V-lingered back to Lake Oconomowoc with Rooke and Ripallo shortly after sunrise. Thatcher had consulted the battlefield computers and received a printout which indicated that a quick, guerilla-type strike was the only means of saving the situation. The others had drawn lots.

Rooke had merely watched. He had already volunteered to lead the party, following a short but hot-tempered hassle with Thatcher in which the Pentagon producer had ultimately promised triple time wages and, most

important, full death benefits from the Fairness pension fund to be paid to Mary Lu regardless of their divorced status in the event Rooke did not survive.

Below, howling, fist-shaking clots of ACVA-AMMA irregulars jammed the streets of Oconomowoc over which they were passing rapidly. The holdouts were clearly surprised by this non-scripted appearance of the huge chopper. Noting their fury, Rooke grew more and more tense.

He moved his left leg gingerly as he squatted in the chopper's open hatch. The holstered press of one of the genuine, loaded, nontheatrical sidearms commanded by Thatcher only, God knew where, unnerved him. He kept fearing that the thing would go off and remove part of his leg.

The chopper pilot began adjusting levers preparing to go down.

"Stand by, gents. It's gonna be a helluva bump."

Thus far the pebbled roof of the Golden-Glo plant, nestled among several other suitably antiquated factory structures, was unoccupied. Behind Rooke, Aaron Peskin shoved his goggles up in place. In his Colonel Googie Greene voice he kept reminding himself aloud:

"It's a performance, nuttin' else. Bluff is half da battle. A performance."

THE actor who had drawn the second lot to fill out the trio, a spindly bit player, had fainted when he lost, or won, depending on how you looked at it. Consequently Putney George had volunteered. George, Rooke had reflected, was truly a loyal Fairness man. He had had no reason for returning to the Staging Zone with the others, except patriotism. The same went for his volunteering. Putney George apparently felt Fairness had been stabbed in the back.

Rooke wasn't all that loyal about it. He was concerned about his ex-wife. Had he not been, he would have been unable to maintain even a semblance of the flint-eyed, stern-jawed expression of a fearless CO. They were, after all, actors going against international assassins.

The chopper dropped down and down. Above the rotor clangor, the vocal fury of the holdouts could now be heard as they ran every which way in the streets below. To Rooke it appeared that the chopper would smash into the cornice of the Golden-Glo plant. The pilot cursed, much perspiration on his face. Rooke gripped the hatchway edges harder, prepared to jump out at impact.

A courier had been despatched to the Pentagon by Thatcher, informing the President and Joint Chiefs of Production that, with their major war going success-

fully at last, the commanders of the Peking bloc had evidently seen fit to release and assign espionage agents to infiltrate the ranks of U.S. commercial war players, with the dimly-guessed purpose of exposing the whole fabric of the trickery and dealing a shatter-blow to U.S. morale.

Perhaps the U.S. was Peking's next target if the anti-Russ campaign went well, as it had been for the past months. Perhaps this blow to morale was but the first stage of the softening process. How the Yellow spies had penetrated the secret of the commercial wars was unknown at the moment, but since that side warred in earnest, it was assumed by Thatcher that their intelligence agents knew all the tricks. There was no doubt that the Yellows had discovered a means of overturning post-hyp blocks. But of course the devils had always been experts at that type of cerebral tampering.

Vivid testimony to their expertise was the appearance of Pierre Pell. Shortly after the scene witnessed on the monitor in the hotel by Rooke and the others, Pell had leaped from the soapbox and fled into the disconcerted crowd. He was still at large somewhere in Greater Chicagoland.

CLEARLY Pierre Pell had been kidnapped. He had vanished from the UDEF bivouac at about

the time Peskin and Rooke discovered the burned-out FF yesterday. He had probably been un-blocked and shipped out of the Staging Zone—or perhaps fetched along by the false Gatch and then released—to spread his message of dissension. Anyway, it was plain that Pierre Pell no longer had any mental barriers to prevent him from speaking about the great fiction to people not directly connected with commercial wars. Rather than worry about Pell, however, Thatcher and the Pentagon had agreed that a strike must be made at the heart of the conspiracy, Oconomowoc.

During the last few seconds the chopper had descended practically to the roof of the Golden-Glo plant. In the factory's truck yard directly below, Rooke saw hundreds of ACVA-AMMA troops queued up outside a bay from which they were being issued firearms. Putney George craned over Rooke's shoulder, howled above the roar:

"Bet those are bandoliers of live stuff. Bet they airdropped it from drone planes coming in over Canada."

A throaty *ker-chow*, a puff of smoke, and the chopper reeled under a metallic whang. Horrified, Rooke looked out through a small circle in the fuselage into blue sky. The tiny circle was an inch above his left glove.

A few more shots were fired from the yard, and several sections of a margarine packing crate were hurled fruitlessly upward, only to fall short. Then the chopper was past the cornice, its skids hitting the pebbled roof and dragging along, slewing the craft around.

"Out, out!" The pilot's voice rose to a squeak. "I ain't taking any more bullets. Lotsa luck."

Rooke leaped to the roof. Aaron Peskin followed. Putney George had hardly begun his deplaning when the pilot, a civilian mercenary, gunned hard. The upward jerk of the chopper spilled Putney combat boots over shock helmet. He managed to pull the big twine-tied, paper-wrapped bale out with him, however. It landed with a clump.

Rooke peered through the anti-glare lenses. Carefully he withdrew his sidearm and pointed the muzzle at a small house-like structure between two of the smokestacks.

"That looks like a stairway."

The chopper whirled away up into the blue sky, leaving the trio alone but fortunately out of sight of the cursing, shouting men in the truck yard below. Among the profanities and obscenities which drifted up to them, Rooke heard cries of, "On the roof, the roof!"

Putney George shuddered visibly. "I've never heard actors so furious before."

"Well," Peskin said, "da bums loined—ah, shove that, I'm so blightly scared I can't keep it up. Guess they've hated Fariness' guts a long time. They finally got a chance to do—"

"The—the—door—"

ROOKE's gauntlet was flung out, pointing. Why, oh why, hadn't he finished Pharmacy H.S.? He was as brave as the next, but the next was not very brave, not in Fairness.

Peskin and Putney George had their backs toward the door panel in the small roofhouse. That door panel now displayed a tiny but widening vertical crack of black between edge and jamb. Putney and Peskin continued to exchange remarks designed to reassure one another. Rooke grabbed the shoulders of their combat jacket to spin them around.

"The door's opening. Get your guns out!"

Putney and Peskin managed to whirl as the door crashed backward. Carrying a large, round-muzzled portable riot cannon, the sinister Oriental whom Rooke had unmasked in the cocktail bar lunged into the light. From the neck downward he was still costumed, though rather grubbily and showing the wrinkles, as Moe Gatch. He had, however, peeled the remaining half of his phony face off in the interim.

"Put up your guns, Americans!" The agent's saffron pate glowed in the sunlight. Behind, thrusting up from the stairwell, came a tough-looking cadre of half a dozen younger Orientals who made no pretense: they were garbed in the flimsy gray disposable paper jackets and pantaloons of the People's Army.

"Tell them to stop shoving in the rear," the leader said over his shoulder.

"It is the plant president, honorable one," said a Sergeant just emerging.

"I instructed you to keep that imbecile in his office, with the girl."

"But he went into a frenzy upon learning we had captured butter trusters, honorable one."

Muzzle to muzzle, the thespian trio faced the fully armed hard core of the Chinese espionage team on the sunlit roof. Tense seconds passed while no one fired. The Orientals refrained, Rooke felt, because they knew they had already won, and could take their time. Rooke refrained out of a firm conviction that he would be finished if he pulled the trigger, since he would probably miss but the Orientals would not.

One lucky thing. The passing reference to a girl indicated that Mary Lu might be safe. Somehow, that made all the fright knotting his belly and all the perspiration worth it.

A raucous voice gave a bleat, a curse, from the dark stairwell. The leader swung his head a bit more. His fierce yellow nose was in profile as he hissed, "I do not want that unruly, witless dupe fumbling out here to spoil—"

Too late. Against the growing shrieks, screams, catcalls and curses from the ACVA-AMMA troops in the yard below, a more strident voice broke through:

"Where are they? Where are the unprintable cowlovers?"

And, nearly knocking the Oriental leader off balance, J. Burton Tanzy, wing collar askew, hair flying, fought his way onto the roof.

LURCHING along rubber-legged, Tanzy dug his left hand into his clothing. He drew out a polished flask, took a hasty swig. Shoulder to shoulder with Rooke, Peskin whispered against the former's helmet, "They're feeding him stim juice, right enough. The UK ought never have pulled out of the China Trade. That liquid hell has proved worse than the poppy."

The Oriental leader chewed his thin lower lip, then adjusted what Rooke was afraid was a cocking mechanism on his riot cannon. He swung the muzzle slightly to the oblique so that it pointed at the wobbling back of the margarine magnate who was tottering toward the trio, his

right hand outstretched. The Oriental's eyes grew even more narrow as he sighted.

Tanzy came on, coked and giggling maniacally. Extended before him on the palm of his hand was a glistening yellow pound brick of Golden-Glo.

"Now, you devils! Burton Tanzy is going to have his revenge. Burton Tanzy is going to watch each of you swallow some of this —" He hiccupped violently.

"Tanzy, be careful!" Rooke said. "They're going to shoot you in the back."

"—swallow some of this superior, refined, emulsified vegetable oil. Hah! Won't that flay the butter trusters? Their own toadies forced to down a vegetable oil product? I'm sick of the restrictions!" Tanzy shrieked, his mind unhinged, all knowledge evidently gone that AMMA participation in the commercial war had been wholly voluntary and worked out at cordial bargaining sessions: "The high-priced spread, the high-priced spread! Why can't we just come out and tell the truth, the truth about that rotten but—"

There was a *blam*.

Watching the Oriental's trigger finger, Rooke had had a slight warning. He had seen the knuckle flesh pale perceptibly. In that separate second, when all his cerebral processes broke down and fear and adrenalin took over,

Rooke brought his right boot flying up, hoping to kick poor Tanzy out of the path of death as the riot cannon went off.

His hip-boot caught Tanzy's outstretched hand. The margarine manufacturer flailed and fell, an instant after the margarine block, kicked from below like a football, shot up into the air.

THE riot cannon chattered again. Rooke and his companions fell flat from instinct. An equally powerful instinct was at work on the other side. Pairs of startled human eyes followed the upward path of the kicked margarine for a fraction of a second. Rooke—he never knew how or why, later—reacted. Perhaps professionalism ran deeper than fear after all:

"Charge!"

Sidearms spitting, the counsel and Aaron Peskin followed Rooke's headlong lunge. Once you got the hang of it, the sidearm was remarkably easy to fire. The noise was thunderous.

The espionage agents in their paper uniforms managed a few return efforts. But having glanced upward collectively at the margarine was their undoing. Rooke's bullets mowed down three. Peskin and Putney George accounted for another four between them. Then only the leader remained, scarcely feet from the charging Rooke now. But fully in

control as he swung the riot cannon around to remove Rooke's head with a single blast.

The trio's attack and the exchange of fire had taken less than seconds. From out of the sun, the brick of Golden-Glo completed its flight path and splattered soundly against the leader's shaved pate.

"Aieeee!"

The Oriental jerked the riot cannon trigger as sunny yellow table spread oozed down around his ears. The light blow on the head threw him off balance just enough, however. The cannon projectile puffed past Rooke to smash blocks from the cornice behind. Rooke had the presence of mind to realize that someone might wish to question the chief spy later. He thrust his sidearm against the Oriental's left leg and fired.

He disarmed the chief spy after he fell. Laughing uproariously in surprise and disbelief, Peskin and Putney George rushed among the other agents, disarming them also. No more Chinese appeared on the stairwell.

"Kill the cow-lovers! Kill the cow-lovers! Kill the cow-lovers!"

The chant, unnoticed by Rooke during the shooting, now beat on his ears with fresh force and menace. Putney George rushed to the cornice, turned back. *"They're coming up the walls!"*

As if it were a cue, a grappling hook, then another, caught the cornice with solid chunks. Rooke hurried in that direction.

Directly below the first hook, a member of AVCA, a genuine sidearm gripped in his teeth, was climbing a flexible ladder. Anti-Fairness hostility shone in his eyes.

"We're finished, Greg," Putney George shuddered. "They'll tear us apart."

Rooke had to admit it looked that way. Desperately he scanned the roof. Then he saw it.

THE men seemed all thumbs getting the twine and wrapping off. But at last, just as the scalp of the first ACVA performer rose above the cornice, Rooke and the others unwrapped the leaflets. They were jerry-printed, the ink still smeary on the front cover where the numerals 50/50! blazed forth in 36-point fluorescent green ink. In his right hand Rooke carried the one other object from the bale as Putney George and Peskin began raining handfuls of leaflets down onto the hundreds in the truck yard.

The actor who had climbed all the way up already had a leg over and resting on the cornice. He was aiming his sidearm at Rooke's forehead.

"Take a leaflet, a leaflet!" Rooke waved one and prepared

to dodge another bullet if necessary. "Actor's Fairness agrees! Fifty-fifty split on the winning roles from now on!"

"It's a trick," snarled the cornice gunman.

"No it isn't, here! The President of Fairness is waiting to talk to anyone of you, any spokesman! You can talk to him if you want. Here, the dial's set for the Vegas band. Just get someone to turn off whatever machine is scrambling the beam signals and you'll be able to talk to him." Rooke held the tiny transmitter inches from the quavering muzzle of the ACVA professional. In rather superior fashion Rooke managed to feel that the man was obviously as inexperienced with firearms. Correction, had been.

The brows of the actor on the cornice beetled briefly. In order to take the transmitter, he had to put away his sidearm. Mercifully, he did.

In minutes, it was all over.

The scrambler was located, turned off and discreetly smashed. The mellow voice of Frankie Clan III, amplified to blare out over the yard, assured the ACVA members that the offer was genuine. The sidearms disappeared.

Putney George found the room where the two UDEF soldiers, kidnapped while on patrol, had been kept prisoner. In Burton Tanzy's executive office—the

margarine magnate tried to block Rooke's entrance by madly running a motorized pallet-load of cartoned Golden-Glo down the corridor; he was carried out frothing—Rooke found Mary Lu, shaken, alarmed, but unbruised. The Oriental leader had been on the point of administering a punishment with some bamboo slivers when the unexpected chopper arrived.

To Rooke's surprise and delight, Mary Lu actually hugged him.

Next came a hasty script conference, with Rooke acting for Fairness, Mary Lu for ACVA. Rooke pointed out that despite the new agreement, to alter the outcome of the current engagement would not be playing by the rules. Delighted by the copy of the leaflet she was reading, Mary Lu offered no objection whatever.

So, at 11:02, the UDEF banner was raised from the Golden-Glo flagpole, per script. The flag fluttered out, rich blue satin and crested with two smiling tots with tumblers of milk rampant upon a field of milking machines and udders.

Even the ACVA-AMMA troops, fingers messy with the green ink of the leaflets, waved and cheered. A new day of concord was at hand. The correspondent from the Free BC was the first to reach Oconomowoc and flash the word to a breathless nation.

The one clear and present danger still remaining was the deranged, unblocked Pell, at large somewhere in Greater Chicagoland and armed with a catastrophic weapon which could undo them all.

The truth.

EASTWARD from the esplanade, lamps in the aqurb bungalows glowed like cheerful fireflies in the twilight. Behind, the Greater Chicagoland skyline reared impressively. A news flimsy went skittering past, left by some pedestrian who had abandoned the strollways to the nippy autumn wind. Part of a headline proclaimed that the Reds were on the advance, the Yellows had suffered a series of calamitous setbacks.

A large, new Unioncarb Preferred Paste stone on Mary Lu's third finger caught a random beam from the sinking sun. The new ring glittered as she snuggled close beside Rooke, eagerly waiting for him to open the cover page of the Master Warscript which had been flown out to them Saturday by the assigned producer.

"Who is it, darling?" Mary Lu said before the opening cover had quite revealed it.

Seated on the right, Rooke had the advantage: "Wow! PanEastern against the Harold Hughes, Junior, Airfleet." Rooke glanced

into his new, yet comfortingly familiar, wife's face. "Sonic dog-fights! This looks like a dandy."

"I've never flown a plane," Mary Lu said.

"Neither have I. The stunt-ers'll do the actual flying. We'll just appear on the cut-in scenes. Think of the great process effects. There we'll be, in the studio cockpit, and it'll look just like—"

"Two dollars for a cuppa java for a vet, mister?"

The bum's whine interrupted their excited talk. Against the dim twilight, radiance in the sky, the bum was a sorry, decrepit figure in a filthy cape, with unclipped hair and untrimmed fingernails. He extended a palsied hand. Rooke goggled.

"Pierre!"

The bum blinked. "You know me?"

"Of course! You're Pierre Pell, former GBC correspondent. Nobody's seen you for months! Where have you been?"

"I don' know you," the bum said, with suspicion. "How about two dollars for a cuppa java?"

Rooke leaped up. "Pierre, let us find a doctor for you."

"G,wan!" The derelict flailed loose, almost savagely. "'M okay. Gotta mission. Gotta tell people—wars 'r phony. Being tricked. Been wandering streets days 'n days. Nobody'll listen."

"Let us help—" Rooke stifled. Pierre licked his lips. He

seemed to peer right through them at nowhere. *Sotto voce*, Rooke said, "His collar."

Mary Lu looked, stifled a gasp. Pierre seemed oblivious. A tell-tale saffron ring was briefly visible. Rooke whispered:

"Probably realizes he's failed his mission and it's driven him mad."

"Casualties," the false Pierre was saying with a sweeping gesture at the skyline. "Three hundred million casualties of th' wars of d'ception. Gotta tell the truth. Tell 'm they're all casualties."

"God," Rooke shuddered, "War is hell. Even our kind."

"War's a lozzy phony deal," Pierre exclaimed.

With only the briefest twinge of conscience, Rooke said, "War is also, unfortunately, necessary. That's where you people made your mistake. You still expend your energies in real killing. We've learned." He indicated the skyline. "They've learned too, even though they don't suspect a thing. That's why nobody would listen. That's why the government gave up looking for you a long time ago. Now get out of here."

"No money for a cuppa java for a vet?"

"No."

Pseudo-Pierre shrugged, blinked, burped. "Well, thas' showbiz," he said vaguely.

THE END

Ensign De Ruyter: DREAMER

By ARTHUR PORGES

Herewith, another adventure of the rising star of the Galactic Navy, in which he dreams up a way to end a war. Hint: the clue to the solution is obvious to the alert reader almost from the very start.

HECTOR WINSLOW, the Licensed Trader on the planet *Faraday*, one of three that circled (or ellipsed, to be precise) 4 Ceti, was fat, but not jolly. Perhaps this was due to indigestion, since he loved—and gorged on—the local food, which was delicious to the taste and would have puzzled the stomach of a healthy buzzard. But whatever the reason, he was no comfort at all to Ensign De Ruyter, who was faced with a tough problem, and had nobody else to consult.

"You must have been born unlucky," Winslow told the boy sourly. "This is the first time in thirty years that the two nations are certain to fight. I've never seen one, myself, but those shovel-bladed spears and saw-toothed

knives must be ugly in action." He took a huge mouthful of *bufar*, the local stew, a combination of ulab meat, herbs, and buds of the dilko plant. It smelled wonderfully appetizing, but De Ruyter knew that even after eighteen years of trying, Winslow's stomach still couldn't quite handle the concoction. So it was not for him, only as many hours on *Faraday*, to risk it.

"It's certainly bad luck that I was dumped here for a week while Captain Morse and the lieutenant go sky-hooting around the galaxy," De Ruyter groaned. "What can I do to stop a war single-handed? All I have is a Markov Pistol and a week's supply of food."

"There isn't a thing you or

anybody can do," was the reply. "When the Head Priest says the god wants a war, they go to it. Not often, I must say, but wholeheartedly. They'll dance around Iron Mike—that's the god, but not their name for him; mine—waving a variety of edged weapons in his black, impassive puss, then send a special arrow to Nabaland. That's a declaration of war—no sneaky stuff here. The Nabanese will accept the invitation, naturally, and all the males in both countries—about sixteen thousand, all told, will fight it out with cold steel." He spat. "It's going to be a bloody mess. No cowards in these nations. About a thousand or so will survive. Maybe," he added wryly, "that's why they don't fight oftener."

"I've got to stop it," the ensign said. "It would be criminal to let fifteen thousand people butcher each other."

"They're savages, basically," Winslow said. "Even their god was made by an earlier civilization; they could never cast anything that big. Spear-blades and knives are all they can manage. Stuff hammered out over coals."

"When will the war start?"

"Depends on the preliminary dance, I think. That's supposed to be tomorrow afternoon."

"What about you?" De Ruyter asked curiously. "Are you safe?"

"Absolutely; they don't kill

outsiders. Besides, I'm too useful to them. But maybe," he added, in a thoughtful voice, "some wild-eyed buck full of battle-madness will take after you. So I'd better share my little secret—one I've kept in mind for a possible pinch."

"What's that?"

"This god of theirs—Iron Mike—seems to stand on a metal platform. But I discovered a hidden tunnel to a room underneath; probably the original builders used it to sucker the simple-minded worshippers, but how I don't know. No gadgets down there that I can find. But anyhow, it's a safe hide-out, and and you might as well hole up there until the war's over."

"You know I can't do that," the ensign replied, unhappily. "It's my duty to stop them."

"You can try," Winslow said, looking his disgust at such quixotry. "If you damned bureaucrats would let us bring in power, even electric or steam, to raise the level, you wouldn't have these primitive wars." He was voicing a common traders' grievance. There wasn't much profit in material on a cultural par with each planet's own, but that was the only sort permitted. The Galactic Parliament didn't want any forced civilization with savages getting nuclear weapons.

"I'll talk to the Chief," De

Ruyter said. "Any chance," he asked wistfully, "of scaring hell out of them with my Markov?" He patted the heavy hand-gun at his waist.

"You could more easily scare a giant weasel or a grizzcat from *Hooke*. These people don't scare. If you shot all but one, in an orderly sequence, he'd come at you with a knife or spear. Me, I'd rather get a bolt of high voltage from the Markov any time. That's why I'd up their technology. But the bony fingers are still on the bridle of progress," he added, in a mournful tone. He had, De Ruyter was already aware, a taste for a juicy metaphor.

"If I can't bully, I'll have to persuade. If I could postpone the war for a week, my ship would be back, and maybe the three of us, with all her power and equipment, could figure out a way to stop it permanently."

"And if sofors had wings, they'd poison the air for miles," Winslow said. The thought of these super-skunks from *Tartaglia* made De Ruyter wince. And with wings, too!

"You mean they never postpone?"

"After waiting thirty years to build up? And dying to let off steam? Give it up, kid. If you were a full admiral, with gold braid to your ankles, they still wouldn't listen."

BUT De Ruyter didn't quit easily. Hundreds of years earlier, his ancestor of the same name had taken on the heavyweight champions of the ocean-sea, and whipped them. Of course, the Dutch were not able to make much use of the victory, and got their comeuppance later, but in the circumstances they had reason to be proud. Some of the old admiral's genes were in this descendant, and working hard. A blood-line capable of trouncing the British at sea ought to be able to manage spear-wielding savages.

But when the ensign talked to the Chief, a huge, barrel-chested man, lemon yellow as to skin, he was quickly disillusioned. Chief Haramaruta was perfectly courteous, with the simple dignity of a St. Bernard confronting a yapping Mexican Hairless, but quite unmoved by De Ruyter's pleas.

"When Lattanugu says 'war,' we must fight." He lifted an iron club high into the air. It was the size of a normal man's thigh, and must have weighed over a hundred pounds on this earthlike planet. The great muscles of the chief's forearm, knotting into thick bulges, showed no signs of strain, however. In fact, he waved the weapon around like a conductor's baton. De Ruyter could almost hear martial music.

The ensign was anxious for a glimpse of the belligerent deity,

and Haramaruta was glad to oblige. He led the boy to the edge of the village, and proudly indicated the idol. It was an iron statue, only a little bigger than the chief himself. It had a grimly ferocious face, and its great taloned paws were stretched out as if to rend any handy worshippinger.

"How do you know the god wants war?" De Ruyter asked.

"The priest says so, and he knows," was the complacent reply.

"Oh, brother!" the ensign muttered. "And I was left here just to make a few notes on local customs. A peaceful bunch, they said; last war many years ago. Perfect timing!" He spoke in his own language, instead of the local dialect used with the chief. It sounded, the boy thought, like a silidor eating peanut brittle under water, but had been easily learned from modern brain-wave educators.

"Is there any way the god might show he changed his mind?" De Ruyter persisted.

"There is none. And Lattanugu is not a woman, to vary."

Even here, the ensign reflected, you find the old sex-bias. Only women changed their minds. Well, that was proof of how human these big, lemon-hued primitives were, after all. It re-emphasized the fact that he could not let them massacre each other.

Disheartened, he again sought out Winslow.

"Any luck?" the trader asked dryly. "They agree to call it off as a favor to you?"

"No," De Ruyter said, his voice hard. "Don't you even care if these people slaughter each other wholesale?"

"I care a lot," was the surprising answer. "But you can't fight that Big City Hall in the Sky, son. I know these characters, and they're spoiling for a fight. Maybe if Lattanugu Iron Mike jumped onto the dance and took away their weapons, they'd cool off. But they're not going to pass up blood for homilies; that I can tell you. So let me show you the mouth of the tunnel, just in case. If this nation gets clobbered, and the Nebanese head this way, I'd advise you to take cover. It won't be for long. Once the fighting's over, they wouldn't hurt a fly. And they never hurt women and children, which shows," he said with heavy irony, "just how damned uncivilized they really are."

"Why," De Ruyter said, giving him a long, wide-eyed stare, "you love these people. That's why you stayed here all these years."

"I'm making money," the trader said, looking him in the eye.

"Sure," the ensign said, his lips twitching. "Let's see that hide-out—just in case."

THE tunnel mouth was well concealed behind a screen of thorn-bushes.

"I discovered it by accident," Winslow said. "Believe me, only the hot breath of an angry raskadik on the back of my neck could have made me plough into these. Tore myself to rags, but found the opening. You wouldn't know it—yet," he added, "but a raskadik looks like a big wildcat, has quills, and makes a furious hornet seem like friendly puppy. Luckily, they have very tender noses—and big—and hate to get thorns in 'em. Mine isn't small," he pointed out, patting it ruefully, "and it's tender, too; but I had no choice."

"No gun?"

"Well," Winslow said, looking a little sheepish, "raskadiks aren't common near a village, and I don't like the fool thing banging my hip raw."

Once in the tunnel, after a gingerly piercing of the thorny cover, the trader used a flashlight to show the way. At the end was a cubical room, quite bare, made of stone. An iron pillar extended from the roof to the floor. It was a cylinder about a foot in diameter.

"They don't know it," Winslow said, "but the Iron Mike has quite a tail. You know," he said, "I've been tempted to have a dream—they take 'em seriously here—about this place, and let

them find it. It would give a lot of prestige; help in trading. But I guess it's too nice a secret, and might be too handy in a pinch, to give away."

"Say," De Ruyter suggested. "Why couldn't I dream the god wants peace?"

"You could; and they'd listen; but unless there was proof, it wouldn't work. And I don't mean sleight-of-hand or any such monkey tricks. They're savages, but not fools, and their priests can do parlor tricks like you never saw. Forget it, De Ruyter. You'll have to sweat it out—like me. I expect to go off a few miles and fish. It bothers me to have several thousand friends metagrobalized into hamburger." His words came lightly, but his face was dark. De Ruyter followed him out of the room in silence.

THAT night De Ruyter sat up very late in his little metaloid pup-tent, flogging a weary brain for some answers. It was beginning to look as if the war would go on. Tomorrow afternoon the big ritual dance was scheduled. Winslow had filled him in on the details. The climax came when the chief and all his lieutenants, one after another, presented their favorite weapons to the god to be sanctified for the killing of their mutual enemies. After that, the legions set out to a traditional battleground, whence a chal-

lenge would go to Nabaland. Within forty-eight hours, the foe would respond, moving in force to the area of battle. Then, slaughter. The ensign groaned. If only the lieutenant had been left here instead of himself! A lousy break. Even if it wasn't his fault, the brass would always wonder why he couldn't have done more. It was a long and sleepless night . . .

But with the morning light there was a dawn in De Ruyter's mind as well. If only there was time, too, and the means. Not to mention a bit of luck.

He disappeared early, but nobody missed him. Winslow had already left, to cast for the uneatable blobs that passed for fish on *Faraday*. And the people were busy preparing for the ritual dance.

But when the ceremony approached its climax, De Ruyter appeared, pouch-eyed and drooping, to address the chief and his lieutenants.

"I had a dream," he announced boldly. "One that all should hear."

The chief's iron face softened briefly.

"Speak," he said; then added, "But not too long; there is much to do."

"There may be little to do," the boy said meaningly. "I dreamed that the great god himself, Lattanugu, wants no war,

but peace for another thirty years."

The huge savage looked down at De Ruyter sceptically. "So? What sign will Lattanugu give us," he asked, with marked sarcasm. "Beware of blasphemy," he warned. "We allow much to outlanders, but Lattanugu is a fierce and jealous god."

"In my dream," De Ruyter continued hardily, ignoring the threat, "the god took your weapons from you. Perhaps that will be his sign. Would you then believe me?"

There was a swelling murmur from the leaders.

"Even the priests would believe that," the chief said. "And they are harder to convince than I. But of course no such thing will happen. It was a false dream—if it was a dream," he added meaningly.

But when the dance continued, the ensign was not around to see anything; but again, few missed him. Instead, every eye watched the chief cavort nearer and nearer to the grim god, finally thrusting at the iron breast with a shovel-bladed spear. There was a mutter of astonishment then, because as the sharp point brushed the taloned paws, they seemed to seize it, holding the blade fast. The giant savage attempted to free his weapon, but not even his mighty strength was enough. **Paling** under his yellow skin, he

backed off, too brave for fear, but not bold enough to battle the god further.

One by one his lieutenants advanced, only to meet with the same treatment. Axes, knives, clubs—Lattanugu snatched and held them all the moment they came within an inch or two of his paws. It was convincing proof of the god's change of heart.

The Head Priest, wild-eyed and with a quaver in his voice, broke the arrow of challenge in full view of all.

"There will be no war!" he announced. "The legions will return to their villages at once." He was obeyed without a single objection.

LATER, aboard their scout-ship, HERSCHEL, Captain Morse and Lieutenant Burton, studied De Ruyter with something approaching awe. If this wasn't a future Galactic Admiral, their predictors were out of order.

"Let me get this straight," the captain said. "You unwound about ten miles of silver wire from the Markov."

"Well, it seemed like that much," the boy said. "And I

needed it all. The more turns, you know, the higher gauss rating."

"That I know."

"Then I wound that pillar in the room; it took hours. Finally I bled the whole potential of the power-cell into the solenoid. I figure," he said proudly, "that my quickie giant magnet had a gauss rating of around 90,000—that's enough almost to pull the iron out of their blood! Naturally, when they poked their knives and spears near the idol—and into the edge of my field—I had them cold: the god was backing my dream to the hilt. Of course, one Markov cell couldn't maintain that kind of a flux very long, but I didn't need much time. It was all over in about fifteen minutes."

"Well, our boy's done it again," Burton said. "We'd better practice saluting him, Captain, because the way he's going, he'll be an admiral before I make commander. I've heard of the Nelson Touch, but this must be De Ruyter's Razzle-Dazzle."

"Yeah," Morse said. "A future admiral."

"Thanks to his magnetic personality," the skipper said.

THE END

Religion in Science Fiction: GOD, SPACE and FAITH

By SAM MOSKOWITZ

What happens to concepts of belief when man voyages to other worlds, meets other intelligences? Here, for the first time, is an exploration of how s-f has handled a theme which may become crucial when space-flight is a reality.

DO alien races have gods? Does the Christian God hold sway over Earth alone or over all the Universe? Should man carry his God with him into space and proselytize other intelligences? Will we find real evidences (positive or negative) of a Supreme Being when we reach interstellar space?

Until recent years, these and similar questions had about as much spiritual urgency as the debates of Talmudic scholars on abstruse Hebraic rituals, or the discussions of the medieval Scholastic theologians about the number of angels who could dance on the head of a pin.

But with a moon landing scheduled for 1970, and with probes already en route to Venus and Mars to determine the possibility

of life on those planets, the question of what happens to our faith when we go into outer space becomes of immediate importance. Philosophers and theologians are already putting down their theories and opinions. Our question is: what has science-fiction done in exploring this facet of the future?

Long before science fiction magazines existed, the genre itself has been used to promulgate mystical or quasi-religious beliefs and theories. For example, the spirits of the dead are discovered on other planets in John Jacob Astor's *A Journey In Other World* (1894). An interstellar ship which has outraced light captures the events of the crucifixion by long-range observa-

tion in *Around a Distant Star* by Jean Delaire (1904); in *Loma, A Citizen of Venus*, (1897), a Venusian named Manrolin appears as the "Angel of the Lord" to Mary, carrying with him a concentrated ray of creative energy which brings about the "Virgin birth" of Christ; and there is the proselytizing message of *Life in a Thousand Worlds* by The Rev. W. S. Harris (1905), where after exploring our solar system, traversing the galaxy and finally reaching Heaven, the author poetically summarizes:

"There are saints from un-
numbered planets,

Where they live in a million
ways

Now they mingle in perfect
glory,

Through the length of eter-
nal days.

NOT every cleric was so presumptuous. In prefacing *Aleriel, or A Voyage to Other Worlds* (1886), the Rev. W. S. Lach-Szyrma, vicar of Newlyn St. Peter, England, stated: "As to the theological question of God's dealings with the inhabitants of other worlds, I have hardly presumed to touch the subject. These things we can only know when we see no more as 'in a glass darkly,' but face to face; and it seems to me that those who have ventured to speculate on it have exceeded propriety."

When science fiction magazines were in their youth, editors for the most part, were content to subscribe to the Rev. Lach-Szyrma's hands-off philosophy. You didn't find much religion in science fiction, but you didn't run across much sin either—so there was little cause for complaint.

Then, a quarter of a century ago, two different approaches to religion in science fiction made their initial marks. One was Robert Heinlein's serial, "*If This Goes On—*" which began in the Feb., 1940, *Astounding*. We shall return to this story later. The other was a hard-cover mainstream novel by Clive Staples Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, published in London in 1938.

Lewis, a "reformed" atheist, may have been stimulated to write his book by the gleeful charges of opponents of Christianity. They pointed out that none of the Christian gospels made allowances for the existence of other physical worlds; and certainly not for the existence of intelligent aliens in non-human forms. These opponents also pointed out that strict adherence to the teachings of Christianity would indicate that any and all such hypothetical worlds or beings were automatically doomed to limbo or worse; and this despite the conceivable possibility that they *might never have fallen from grace at all*.

Lewis' book received extensive critical recognition and applause. In it, he took theology to the planets. . . . unabashedly carrying with him the ideas and principles his religious opponents said would be discredited as a result of the first space voyage. Lewis even utilized them as if they were unalterable laws of the universe.

On the Mars of *Out of the Silent Planet*, the kidnapped hero, a Cambridge philologist named Ransom, escapes from his captors to discover a world in which paradise has never been lost, and whose intelligent inhabitants have never fallen from grace. It is ruled by an angel, a creature of light and energy. Three diverse life forms exist: a race of seven-foot-long otter-like creatures, proficient at fishing and poetry; large frog-bodied animals that are miners and artisans; and 18-foot tall, bird-descended, feather-coated intelligences who delight in astronomy and history. All three races are "human," all three have *souls*, and all three dwell in perfect harmony.

The "silent planet" is earth. Its angel is "bent" (the Devil), and nothing has been heard from that world by the other planets since before the creation of man. The planetary angels are all in tune with God, the creator of the universe, and each planet has one such entity in supervision. Only

earth is no longer a member of this solar unity.

In recent times, apologists for Christianity have tended to explain certain background aspects of the faith as allegorical messages not intended literally. Lewis would have none of that. He subscribed to the literal interpretation: There is not only a God, he held, but there was an Eden and man was tempted and did fall from his high estate, even as described in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Angels *did* exist and do *now* exist, the battle between the Hosts of Heaven and Satan did most certainly occur, and Satan was defeated and is held incommunicado with his evil minions on the planet Earth.

What made such a premise acceptable at all to many readers was Lewis' superior feel for language, an immense sincerity and most especially an obvious love for the format of the space story. A prefatory note in *Out of the Silent Planet* states: "The author would be sorry if any reader supposed he was too stupid to have enjoyed Mr. H. G. Wells' fantasies or too ungrateful to acknowledge his debt to them."

There were numerous other fantasies which Lewis doted upon, especially those of George McDonald and Charles Williams, (the latter popularized the device of taking the supernatural for

granted and placing it into the context of a detective story), as well as *The Worm Ouroboros* by E. R. Eddison. Most specifically Lewis designated Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men* (1930) and "an essay in J.D.S. Haldane's *Possible Worlds*," both of which he regarded as an immoral view of man's outlook on space travel, as the inspiration for *Out of the Silent Planet*.

Stapledon's volume, which chronicles the history of man for the next two billion years, supplied intensive detail on the religions which marked each period of the development of humanity. He told, for example, of the rise of the cult of The Divine Boy in the Patagonian culture, which held that God was the fruit of man's endeavor and whose Golden Rule was: "Remain young in spirit." The rise of "The Third Men," in Stapledon's work brought into being a prophet who proclaimed music as the ultimate religion; the monarch of the land assumed the title of Supreme Melody and founded the Universal Church of Harmony which believed that "every human being was a melody, demanding completion within a greater musical theme of society." There were others through the eons leading to the final one, "The Soul of All," when the Last Men, doomed to extinction, explored the past so that members of the human race

could find rapport not only with all others living but with all others who had ever lived (communing with the dead.)

This seemingly heretical picture—ages of men wearing out and casting off old beliefs even as they designed new ones for their times—was anathema to Lewis. In his youth Lewis had lapsed into atheism. An entire book, *Surprised by Joy* (1955), is devoted to this story, relating the bits and pieces of the realization which saw him voluntarily return to the faith at the age of 31. Then, in the manner of many converts, he set about making the justification of his decision the end-all and be-all of his life.

It appears probable that Stapledon got the design for *Last and First Men* from Haldane's *The Last Judgement* (1927). Subtitled "A Scientist's Vision of the Future of Man," it was a chronological presentation of the next 40 million years of man written as an essay. What undoubtedly annoyed Lewis about Haldane (a scientist who became a Marxist) was that he began and ended his presentation with disdainful references to the shortcomings of Christianity when faced by scientific facts. In this context Haldane said: "But the more serious objection [to Christianity] is perhaps to the scale of magnitudes employed.

The misbehaviors of the human race might induce its creator to wipe out its planet, but hardly the entire stellar system. We may be bad, but I cannot believe that we are as bad as all that. *At worst our earth is only a very small septic area in the universe, which could be sterilized without very great trouble, and conceivably is not even worth sterilizing.*"

Those very lines provide the entire thesis of *Out of the Silent Planet*: earth is cut off from the society of the rest of the solar system. Lewis had replied to Haldane in effect: "I do believe you are right." But Lewis had also resumed the battle of religion against science, with *science* the villain.

HIS battleground now moved from Mars to Venus. His second book, *Perelandra* (1944), has the same set of human characters as *Out of the Silent Planet*. Venus (*Perelandra*), being a younger world, is hypothesized to be in the precise state of development as earth was at the time of Adam and Eve. Satan, who may not himself leave earth, sends the scientist Weston by space-ship to seduce Venus' Eve and thus create another Fallen World. The hero again is Ransom, who is mystically transported to Venus by the Head Angel of Mars to thwart this design.

The plot is cosmic cloak-and-

dagger, but the critical reception the book got when it appeared was overwhelming. Said THE SATURDAY REVIEW OF LITERATURE: "One reads with every kind of excitement . . . One's own fancy, one's own thought, leap after the writer's. Agreement, dissent, analogy wake in the lethargic mind. The gleams of satire, the strokes of illumination, leave very little to be desired. . . . It has been impossible to give a notion of the freshness and clearness, the unpretentious nobility of the fable and the thought. . . ."

The third book in the trilogy, *That Hideous Strength* (1947), finds the devil prompting the misguided men behind the National Institute of Co-ordinated Experiments to use science to "take over the human race and recondition it: make man a really efficient animal." To combat this tendency, hero Ransom wakes King Arthur's magician Merlin from suspended animation and, enlisting the aid of the good Martian Angel, again thwarts the effort. In prefacing *That Hideous Strength*, C. S. Lewis again bows in the direction of Stapledon of whom he says: ". . . I admire his invention (though not his philosophy) so much that I should feel no shame to borrow."

Now, however, he borrows much more than superficial plot

from Stapledon. From Stapledon, an agnostic, he borrows *an entire religious philosophy as it applied to the space age*. Stapledon expressed the philosophy that man might be the spark destined to revitalize the cosmos. Lewis embraces with fervor those views in *Will We Lose God in Outer Space?* (CHRISTIAN HERALD, April, 1958) in wrestling with the problem of why the Earth was singled out for the appearance of Christ: "*It may be that Redemption, starting with us, is to work from us and through us.*"

It is almost as though Lewis had answered "Yes" to the challenging question posed by Stapledon in his last book, *The Opening of the Eyes* (1954):

"Tell me, Christians. Is it that in each world of all the myriad earth-like worlds blossoming throughout the galaxy and the whole cosmos of galaxies, God incarnates himself as a local Jesus, to save his erring creatures? Or is it that once only, and on our unique planet, the supreme miracle happens; *and that from this chosen world alone the gospel must radiate throughout the cosmos?* By rocket space-ship, traveling at half the speed of light shall some future Paul spread the good news among the Transgalactic gentiles?

It is not inconceivable. For those who need Jesus to be God, either possibility is believable."

TO return now to the other major approach to theology in science fiction—Heinlein's serial "*If This Goes On—*". There was a prelude to that story that was never written. It was to have been called *The Sound of His Wings* and "it would have recounted the early life, rise as a television evangelist, and subsequent political career of the Reverend Nehemiah Scudder, the 'First Prophet, President of the United States and destroyer of its Constitution, founder of the theocracy.'"

When "*If This Goes On—*" opens, all of the U.S. is ruled by a theocracy. Guards for the "Angels of the Lord" are graduated from West Point. Heinlein underscores the ultimate potential of a state religion, and by indirection offers a scathing indictment of the manner in which a faith has sometimes been used as a means of enslaving and exploiting man. The blatant hypocrisy rampant behind the facade of piety displayed by the Angels of The Lord is unquestionably biting satire even in its action format.

Heinlein sincerely believed that "we could lose our freedom by succumbing to a wave of reli-

gious hysteria. I am sorry to say that I consider it possible. I hope that it is not probable. But there is a latent deep strain of religious fanaticism in this our culture; it is rooted in our history and it has broken out many times in the past. It is with us now; there has been a sharp rise in strongly evangelical sects in this country in recent years, some of which hold beliefs, theocratic in the extreme, anti-intellectual, anti-scientific and anti-libertarian."

Religion, as we have said, had only been touched upon gingerly in magazine science fiction to this point. About as candid as anyone cared to get was John Beynon Harris (John Wyndham) in his remarkable story *The Venus Adventure* (WONDER STORIES, May, 1932). Here he told how a primitivist religion, based upon the beliefs of a fanatical space pioneer, led a Venus sect down the road to degeneracy and cannibalism. By contrasting it with the progress of a similar group free of superstition (or religion), Harris left no question as to where he stood on the subject.

The true godfather of the incorporation of religion into modern periodical science fiction was John W. Campbell. An early intimation of his interest in the subject was expressed in *The Machine* (ASTOUNDING STORIES,

Feb., 1935), wherein human sacrifices are thrown into the moving gears of a gigantic thinking machine which runs the world. The throwers are a race of humans who have forgotten not only their own history, but even the reason the machine was built. Campbell not only bought "*If This Goes On—*" but the idea for Heinlein's second religious-oriented novel, *Sixth Column*, (under the pen name of Anson MacDonald) was suggested by Campbell. It told of an America, conquered by Asiatics, which forms a new religion in whose temples is trained the cadre of an army of liberation. Its relationship to Campbell's *Out of Night* (ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION, Oct., 1937) is trademarked by the giant image of blackness in the shape of a man that appears at the end of each story.

The real moral problem posed in *Sixth Column* is the necessity for Americans to devotedly perform the ritual and follow the dogma of a religion that they know to be *false*, in order to save the nation.

"But how are we going to be convincing?" one man asks.

"We don't have to be convincing—not in the sense of being converts," is the reply. "We just have to be convincing enough to look like a legitimate religion to our overlords. And that doesn't have to be very convincing. All

religious look equally silly from the outside."

HEINLEIN'S most inspired use of religion as a theme in science-fiction appeared in *Universe* (ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION, May, 1941), which has as its locale a gargantuan space ship that has been traveling for thousands of years towards a forgotten destination. A radiation accident has produced a group of mutants, some with two heads. Through the centuries, new generations have evolved the belief that the ship itself is the entire universe. The concept of sin arises to explain the appearance of mutations, who live in a different portion of the ship.

Clifford D. Simak took up Heinlein's idea and developed the intricacies of a religion that might be essential for survival on a 1,000-year space-ship trip in *Spacebred Generations* (SCIENCE-FICTION PLUS, Aug., 1953). He created ceremonies, rituals, symbols, and the spiritual implications of the procedures. However, Simak was no Johnny-Come-Lately to the use of religion in science fiction. He had actually preceded Heinlein by being the father of the *sacreligious* S-F story.

Simak's first in that vein was *The Voice in the Void* (WONDER STORIES QUARTERLY, Spring, 1932), where the messiah of the

Martian religion is revealed, after his death, to have been merely an earth man who landed on that planet. More daring was *The Creator*, rejected by every magazine of the period and finally published in the March-April, 1935, issue of a semi-professional magazine, MARVEL TALES. Carried out of space by a time machine, its characters discover that the earth was not created by God, but is the laboratory experiment of a macrocosmic being.

The supercharged novel, *Cosmic Engineers*, by Simak has as a special character an insane entity, too ancient to be responsible, who parallels God on his world in a manner that is no endorsement of established religion. Simak evidently welcomed the cooperation of Heinlein in breaking taboos, for his novelet *Hunch* (ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION, July, 1943) is a highly sophisticated blow at the religious claim for a hereafter; the concept of heaven is disguised under the term "Sanctuary," a future haven in the stars for those burdened by earthly woes.

Simak's novel *Time Quarry*, serialized in GALAXY SCIENCE FICTION starting with the October, 1950 bound issue and in hard covers as *Time and Again* (Simon and Schuster, 1951), was a *tour de force* of the webwork technique in science fiction. It

concerns a man who reads a copy of a book he will write in the future that will start a new religion. The details of that religion are inspired again by Stapledon. Its premise is that "nothing walks alone," that all intelligence, regardless of its form, is brought into awareness through a symbiosis with an intangible, universal energizer. Simak, like Stapledon, is against the vestments of worship, believing that the ultimate salvation of the race rests solely in the unity of mind.

In *Universe*, Heinlein made the point that the "devils" of that space ship, the mutated two-headed, many-limbed creatures actually represented the brightest hope of the "normal" humans aboard. Fritz Leiber, writing in *Gather, Darkness* (ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION, May-June-July, 1943), has a cult disguised as devil worshippers try to overthrow a religious dictatorship. All the paraphernalia of the minions of darkness come into play in a successful attempt to depose the despotic theocracy. Witches, familiars, and vampires are not only "scientifically" explained, but are the sentimental "heroes" of the novel.

Though it did not serve to spark Leiber's work, Dr. David H. Keller's book *The Devil and the Doctor* (Simon & Schuster, 1940) contained the basic elements of the plot of *Gather,*

Darkness, and represents a fictional counter to C. S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*. It is the story of Robin Goodfellow (the Devil) who comes to tea with a middle-aged physician (Jacob Hubler) and proceeds to tell his side of Creation, the War in Heaven and the Fall. From his earliest days "exploring the dead craters of the moon, or canoeing on the canals of Mars," the Devil proves to be a much more decent sort than his "brother" angel. It has been the Devil who has taught men all concepts of progress and imparted learning, whereas his brother angel wanted only non-questioning superstitious worship. He is called "the Angel of Darkness" because he may only have men's minds at night. All mishaps are blamed on him and all good attributed to his "brother" through a weighted system of propaganda. In each generation a few persons are permitted to know the truth.

THERE was a moratorium on significant science fiction stories involving religion during World War II. The one figure to emerge with a moral tone strong enough to be termed religious was H. F. Heard (Gerald Heard), whose three books—*The Great Fog* (1944), *The Doppelgangers* (1947), and *The Lost Cavern* (1948)—contained fantastic detective stories with a religious

theme as well as science fiction which championed the positive moral values of religion without espousing unquestioning acceptance of rituals or dogma.

The man who carried the torch of C. S. Lewis into the science fiction magazines was Ray Bradbury. Experimenting with off-beat subject matter as well as style, Bradbury had already sold to COLLIER'S, CHARM, MADEMOISELLE and THE NEW YORKER. *The Man* (THRILLING WONDER STORIES, Feb., 1949) was quite evidently something aimed at a better market: the first ship of an earth fleet lands on another world, but is ignored because something *more* important happened only the day before—the coming of Christ. The Captain of the earth ship resorts to violence to learn Christ's destination. Unsuccessful, he vows to blast from planet to planet until his search is rewarded. Actually, Christ is still on the globe the captain left behind. The moral Bradbury tries to convey is that a *physical* search for salvation is useless.

Still more significant was Bradbury's *In This Sign* (IMAGINATION, April, 1951) published in *The Illustrated Man* (1951) as *The Fire Balloons*. It involves two Episcopalian fathers, one of whom has written a book titled *The Problem of Sin on Other Worlds*. They set off for Mars to establish a church to redeem

Martians from their weaknesses. Their intent is "to leave old sins here. And on to Mars to find *new* sins."

Their confidence is sublime. "I will recognize sin," one states, "even on Mars."

They learn of blue globes of sheer energy in the Martian highlands which give every indication of intelligence. A church is built in this area, and the strains of their organ draw the Martian globes to them. The Martians telepathically transmit the message that they were once physical entities but now are energy creatures, free of all desires of the flesh, owning no property, subscribing to no arrogance, living eternally, doing no harm. "We have left sin behind," they say, "and it is gone like the soiled snow of an evil winter, and it is gone like the sexual flowers of a red-and-yellow spring, and it is gone like the panting nights of hottest summer, and our season is temperate and our clime is rich in thought." The Fathers, thoroughly chastened, ask to learn from them.

The basic plot line was used by James Blish for *A Case of Conscience* in IF, Sept., 1953. The protagonist, Father Ramon Ruiz-Sanchez, lands with an expedition upon the planet Lithia, 50 light-years from earth, to establish its suitability as a port-of-call for space ships. He discovers

an intelligent reptilian race free of the acquisitive and emotional faults of man; a race so serene and high-minded—but without religion—that their lives serve as an example of what earth might have been if man were not a fallen race. The priest decides this world is too perfect for the laws of probability, and therefore may be an illusionary trap baited by the powers of darkness. But, unable to find any flaw in the Lithians, he leaves with the gift of a vase containing a Lithian fertilized egg. If everything on Lithia is really as it seems, he is carrying back to earth a bizarre new “Christ” created after the manner of this race—without original sin.

THE fate of the transplanted Lithian on Earth is chronicled in an expanded version of *A Case of Conscience* (Ballantine Books, 1958). As it grows to maturity, it leads a worldwide crusade attacking all established morals and mores. Its behavior is antipodal to that of its forebears. The priest is excommunicated.

Earth men begin building a fusion-bomb plant on Lithia, disturbing the idyllic situation. Then the news arrives that the earth-raised Lithian is on his way to the planet of his genesis to figuratively assume the role of the snake in the Garden of Eden. The priest exorcizes Satan from

the planet. As he concludes, Lithia blooms into a nova. Scientists believe that an accident at the fusion bomb plant has exploded the planet; but the priest is convinced that he has sprung the theological trap and saved the faith.

This expanded version won the Hugo as the best science fiction novel of 1958. Two years later, when another theosophical science fiction novel, *A Canticle for Leibowitz* by Walter M. Miller, Jr., won the Hugo, the impact of theology as a force in science fiction was an undeniable reality.

The series of stories from which *Canticle* was expanded appeared in THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION during 1955, 1956 and 1957. The whole proved infinitely better than any of the parts. Atomic disaster has destroyed most of civilization and spread cannibalistic mutations across the countryside. The sole remaining repository of knowledge is the Albertian Order of St. Leibowitz, named after a Jewish physicist who was hanged after the blowup. The story ranges across thousands of years during which the disciples of St. Leibowitz spark a renaissance, and start the world on the path of progress again.

Though this novel is one of the most favorable portrayals of the Catholic church ever set down on paper, it follows the method of

Heinlein rather than Lewis. Its author thumbs his nose at most supernaturalism, and mocks ritual and dogma even as he seeks to justify its necessity in an ignorant world. If Heinlein shows religious charlatanism as a cover for evil, Miller displays it as a justifiable means for a demonstrable good.

LESTER del Rey took the cue from *A Canticle for Leibowitz* that the rigmarole of a church might cloak ultimate good. *The Eleventh Commandment* (Regency Books, Jan., 1962) told of a post-atomic world with the church ruling. An ever-spiraling population reduces people to misery because of the church's opposition to birth control. It develops that the church is implementing a necessary plan to stabilize a viable human species from a catastrophic welter of mutations.

This was not del Rey's first venture in religion. His "*If Ye Have Faith . . .*" (OTHER WORLDS, May, 1951) utilized God as a character. Far more sacrilegious in the Simak vein, yet accepting the C. S. Lewis precept that every word of the gospel is literally true, was his *For I Am a Jealous God* (Star Short Novels, 1954) in which God turns against the human race and swings to the side of the aliens. Del Rey's problem is that the entire weight of each story must be

carried by the shock appeal of the concept.

Undoubtedly one of the most skillful and ingenious science fiction stories involving theology was *The Quest for Saint Aquin* by Anthony Boucher (*New Tales of Space and Time*, Edited by Raymond J. Healy, 1951). The impoverished Pope of the post-atomic-war world, where few believers exist, orders one of his holy men, Thomas, to seek the remains of Saint Aquin, a good man who before his death led many people back to the church. Mounted on a robot ass, Thomas engages in a dialogue with the machine, which cynically challenges his faith. The discovery that Saint Aquin was actually a robot, *who nevertheless must be canonized if the church is ever to attract adherents*, is almost more than the good Thomas can bear.

It is perhaps significant that the author who broke the taboos against sex in science fiction with *The Lovers*, Philip Jose Farmer, should also be most fascinated by religion. That novel and its sequel, *Moth and Rust*, not only incorporate as background a variety of new religion that have replaced Christianity, but interpenetrates the effect of religion on the actions, speech and outlook of the people in the stories. Religion becomes an important element, but merely *one* element, in his stories. Farmer

plays with religion as a child with a new toy. He is neither for it or against it. His Father Carmody, an impious cleric who solves problems of faith in a somewhat roguish manner while hopping from world to world, reflects this facet of his curiosity.

The men who promoted the re-evaluation of the role of religion in science fiction, Olaf Stapledon and C. S. Lewis, are dead. Heinlein, who introduced it into the

science fiction magazines, has long since tired of it as a focal plot device. Nevertheless, the decision is made. The science fiction writer has come to the conclusion that scientific advance will not mean the end of belief. He feels certain that a truly convincing portrayal of a hypothetical future cannot be made without considering the mystical aspirations of man.

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH



Poul Anderson's newest novel, The Corridors of Time, is the feature attraction of the May issue of AMAZING. Anderson ranges the past and future of the earth through subterranean temporal pathways—and always with the violent action go ideas, theories, philosophies of what-might-have-been and what-may-yet-be.

Also in the next AMAZING, a fascinating science fact article by Ben Bova on how to measure the stars—and why.

The May AMAZING goes on sale at your newsstand April 8.

greendark ⁱⁿ the cairn

By ROBERT ROHRER

*Capt. Stanley found out that if
you can only sink low enough, it is
possible to climb high. But he
found this out the hard way.*

ALL RIGHT MISTER YOU KNOW
YOU'RE CRACKING UP YOU KNOW
THAT YOU ARE GOING OVER THE
EDGE WHY DON'T YOU ADMIT THAT
YOU'RE BATS MISTER YOU ARE BATS
UP THERE IN THE WHERE IT'S SUP-
POSED TO BE YOU AIN'T GOT IT NO
MORE ("Captain.") MISTER YOU
WANT TO SEE THE INSIDE OF HELL
MISTER WELL ("Captain Stan-
ley.") LOOK

"Captain Stanley."

"What?" Stanley turned in his
swivel chair. Jackson, the first
mate, was standing in the door-
way of Stanley's cabin. Stanley
had been facing the rear wall,
but now he put his feet back un-
der his desk and leaned forward
on his elbows. He said, "What?"

"We've got her in the scopes,
sir. Any time you're ready we
can start the run."

"All right, Jackson. I—" YOU
WANT TO SEE THE INSIDE OF HELL

("... I'll be ...") AGAIN MIS-
TER LIKE YOU SAW IT BEFORE WITH
THE BLOOD ("Captain?") AND THE

"Are you all right, sir?"

"I'm okay." Stanley stood up.
He wanted to make this run. He
knew that something awful was
happening inside him and that it
might be the same thing that
had gotten him once before, but
he wanted to make this run. He
wanted to be the one to get those
butchers. Those ugly butchers.
He could hold on. He could hold
on that long—

HOLD ON HOLD ON WATCH THE
CRACKS IN THE LINOLEUM RE-
MEMBER THE CRACKS IN THE LI-
NOLEUM WHEN YOU WERE
PULLING BACK UP OUT OF ONE OF
THEM AND YOU HELD ONTO THE
CRACKS IN THE LINOLEUM
AND THEY WERE LITTLE CRACKS
AND YOUR FINGERS WERE TOO BIG
TOO TOO TOO BIG BIG DO YOU RE-

MEMBER THE SHEETS AND THE SWEAT AND THE ROCKS INSIDE YOUR RIBS MISTER (pull out) THE SWEAT SHVIERING DOWN YOUR FACE (pull out, pull out, How many)

"How many was it they killed, Jackson?" asked Stanley, although he knew how many. They were walking down the corridor toward the main lift, now.

"Fifteen hundred, sir. Fifteen hundred, with women, and—"

CHILDREN YOU SEE THEM MISTER IN THE FIRE YOU PUT THEM THERE YOU SEE THEM WATCH THEM DIE ("She's probably")

"Out of ammo, her guns are dark, but I think a silent run's the safest thing, sir. It could be a trick. And this is our last torp."

"Yeah," said Stanley. He was angry about the children. Being angry about them helped him forget that it was his fault they were dead.

WHY THE GREENDARK IN THE CAIRN MIDWAY

Cold sweat burst out all over Stanley's body. He had thought that before. He had thought that—the last time. All the time, the last time. And the voice, the voice was the same . . .

WHY THE GREENDARK IN THE CAIRN MIDWAY

"We'll get them," said Stanley. "These won't get away."

WHY THE GREENDARK IN THE CAIRN MIDWAY

He had ground his teeth over that one, it had kept coming again and again, he hadn't been able to think anything else—

WHY THE GREENDARK IN THE CAIRN MIDWAY

WHY THE GREENDARK IN THE CAIRN MIDWAY

ADMIT IT MISTER YOU ARE C-R-A-C-K-I-N-G U-P WHY DON'T YOU QUIT FIGHTING IT (fight it) LET IT COME (pull out, pull, How)

"How?" It quivered stupidly into the frigid air of the cylindrical cab of the main lift. The lift was going up, toward the attack room.

"How what, sir?" asked Jackson.

THERE, now he had to think of a question or Jackson would know for sure he was going crackers and wouldn't let him make the run (like hell, I'm captain, I'll give the orders) think think

"How does it look, Jackson? I mean, how does it look to *you*?"

"It looks fine, sir." Was there something in his voice, a shadow. . . ? "We've only got one torp left, but we'll get them, if it isn't a trap, and I don't see how it could be. The guns are dark, and with our scrambler up and our jets off they won't spot us until we're too close and then they. . ."

No, there was nothing in Jackson's voice. Nothing beyond the

usual undulating dullness that always tore away at whatever Jackson happened to be talking about, whether it was the fuel supply or women or how to get the enemy before the enemy got the ship. Now Jackson was talking about killing a thousand ugly butchers, and he was making it sound dull.

Everything looked dull to Stanley. The angles of the cab seemed blurred and flattened, the lights of the control board did not jab into his eyes but seemed honed-down, like full-color pictures of themselves

THEMSELVES AGAINST THE WALLS TRYING TO GET AWAY FROM THE FIRE BUT IT CAUGHT THEM ALL AND IT WAS YOUR FAULT YOU SHOULD HAVE GOTTEN THEM THROUGH STUPID STUPID YOU STUPID (when this happened it was as though he couldn't see) AND REMEMBER THAT OTHER SHIP YOU LOST YOUR OWN SHIP (it was as though his eyes could see but his mind couldn't, and there was the wall of the cab and he could see it, but not beyond the very tips of his corneas) AND REMEMBER YOUR SHIP BURNING IN THE CRACKS IN THE LINOLEUM AND HURTING YOUR FINGERS SO YOU LET GO AND FELL BACK AGAIN AND AGAIN AND

What is the matter with me? thought Stanley, furiously shaking his head. He thought it because he was trying to fool him-

self. He knew what was wrong. Losing another ship, even though this one hadn't been his own, had torn off the old scab, and his mind was gushing out and away as it had once before. Losing this ship was worse than losing the other, because this one had been a passenger ship, and it had been his responsibility to protect it. He had failed. Those butchers had somersaulted right under his belly and had powdered that civvy passenger ship and the people had come flying out and had twirled away into the void. He had watched. He had chased those butchers and harried them halfway across the Forth Quadrant, and now he *had* them, he—

DO YOU WANT TO SEE THE INSIDE OF HELL

Stop! Stanley barely kept himself from clapping his hands over his ears. He wasn't going crazy, he wasn't going crazy, not now, no no *no*.

ADMIT IT MISTER YOURE CRACKING UP

No!

WHYTHEGREENDARKINTHECAIRNMIDWAYWHYTHEGREEN-DARKINTHECAIRNMIDWAYWHY

No! But they were there again, he could feel them, the rocks in his ribs *No!* he had to make this run and kill those butchers

Then he saw the inside of HELL

ADMIT IT MISTER YOURE CRACKING UP

Yes. He had to. Admit it.

LET IT COME

He let it come.

IMMEDIATELY he knew that something was wrong. Instead of being immersed by an awful flood of depression, the shores of his mind cleared. His thoughts focussed. Colors and images regained their former sharpness. Through his entire body there spread a warm numbness.

Something was wrong, something was wrong. Suddenly Stanley *wanted* to tell Jackson that something was wrong. He formed the words in his mind: *Jackson, I don't feel well.* He tried to say the words.

He couldn't.

The door of the lift opened, and Stanley and Jackson stepped into the corridor that led to the attack room. Stanley heard his footfalls on the vinyl floor, but he didn't feel them in his legs. Then he knew what was wrong. He no longer had control over his body.

He was well away from the edge of chaos now. He hadn't gone over. This wasn't like the last time at all. This was something else. Something that had ridden in on the wave of insanity that had threatened to swamp him.

They reached the door of the attack room. Stanley pressed his hand against the sensory lock

and the door slid open. He did that by his own volition, he could still do a harmless, necessary thing like that, but he couldn't tell Jackson that he didn't feel well—

In the attack room, Ross and Price were making adjustments on the various instruments that would be used in the run. They stood on opposite sides of the room. At first Stanley was surprised that Price was there, but in the next instant he wasn't surprised at all. Price knew how to handle silent torp runs the best of anyone in the crew. Price was there to take over if Stanley dropped out. Jackson was suspicious, after all.

Ross was second mate and nearest the door. Stanley returned Ross's salute, he could do that, that was necessary. He didn't like Ross because Ross was smart and let Stanley know it with his eyes and his face, if not with his voice. At that very moment, underneath his stiff, spade-handed officer's-school salute, Ross was looking superiorly at Stanley. *Damn you, Ross,* thought Stanley.

Price was sweating over the guts of the range calculator. Price was the ship's mechanical genius. He had an office of his own. If anything went wrong with the ship, Price could fix it; if anything went wrong with a sailor in a key battle position,

Price could take over. Stanley didn't mind Price because Price was smart in a line of work that Stanley had never even considered following. Stanley saluted Price.

Price said, "Just about ready, sir."

Stanley nodded and said, "Jackson, connect with the rocket room and tell Geryng to transfer control up here."

"Yes, sir."

Stanley moved toward the control platform. He could still give necessary orders, whatever was controlling him wasn't keeping him from—

Whatever. If he was being controlled, there had to be a whatever that was controlling him, didn't there? So, what could it, who would, who *could*—

He saw the truth. He saw it because suddenly he remembered a pattern.

Many of the enemy's ships had wriggled out of inescapable positions in the past few months of the war. Nothing definite was known about the scientific achievements of the enemy. But many times, enemy ships had escaped from seemingly impossible situations because of blunders made by sailors of the Earthfleet; small, stupid blunders that might have been written off as chance had similar errors not occurred again and again. A rumor had spread through the ranks that

the enemy was able to control minds. Stanley had scoffed at the rumor. Now he believed it. The butchers had taken over his mind.

THE "control platform" was a slightly raised, circular section of the floor. It was set before the large, cross-haired lens-viewport. It was ringed by a semi-elastic railing. A flat control board with a microphone was mounted on the railing. Stanley would use the controls to adjust the course of the ship and to release the torp. The railing was hung around with black, cylindrical hand grenades, which were to be used if the enemy boarded the ship during a battle—a not uncommon occurrence during engagements between smaller vessels, which quickly ran out of ammunition.

Stanley took his position on the platform. He didn't want to. He wanted to step aside and let Price take over, because he saw, he saw what those butchers were going to do, they were going to make him *miss*. They were going to make him miss with the ship's last torpedo, and that would be that, because the enemy ship was a battleship, and for the crew of an attack craft to board a battleship would be suicide.

Depression began to seep into Stanley's mind. He was to be the instrument of escape of the

butchers who had destroyed a ship in his charge, a civilian passenger ship filled with innocents. It had been his fault that they had gotten the passenger ship. They always tried for the biggest kills, the ones that would blow the largest holes in the morale of the Earthfleet, but Stanley had been stupid, he had thrown up his defense around the smaller, ammunition-bearing merchant ships.

Now, suddenly, he saw that it was his fault that the butchers had gained control of his mind. That attack of madness, that hadn't been a real attack at all, it had been a red herring, a patchwork fraud made of memories culled from his mind by the enemy to frighten him, to make him submit to control, to make him "let it come." If he had fought that "madness" til the end, they would not have succeeded. If he had shucked his ego and told Jackson to let Price make the run, their attempts would have been made futile.

He had done nothing. They had him now because of his own weakness, and for no other reason.

"Ready, sir."

Stanley's hands reached out and began dusting across the control board with the rapidity of *expertise*, throwing up the scrambler, starting the ship with one burst of the rockets, priming

the torp; the enemy ship clicked into visibility under the infra-red spotlights; the flexible, magnifying lens-viewport automatically adjusted to keep the image of the ship larger-than-life in the cross-hairs as Stanley's vessel moved closer.

Despair was slowly eating away at Stanley's mind. The butchers had gotten to him by reviving his memories of all the little hells he had been through and using them as levers, thousands of tiny levers to pry up his resistance and topple it. They had reminded him of all his previous degradations, the big ones and the small ones; they had made him believe that he was about to go through them all over again—and he had *given in* and let the debasement come. He now saw himself as a simpering weakling, the simpering weakling he really was, he had always been weak, he recalled and reviewed all the events of his pitiful life and saw that he had been only an ineffectual stand-in performer in them, an impotent novice who shouted directions to the other players but could never quite make them hear and obey, he was weak, weak, *weak* (the instruments on the control board told him that the battleship was only twenty miles away now, a few minutes, a few few minutes) they had played on his weakness. They were counting on his

weakness now, for he knew that there was only one thing he could do to balk them but he was too afraid of death to do it (closer now, ready on the red switch)

besides, killing himself would be hard. He would have to fool the butchers, they wouldn't let him make any moves that might spoil their little plan, he would have to plot out a careful course of false impressions to kill himself, and he would have to do it in such a way that the others in the attack room couldn't stop him, and he would have to do it *quickly* because—There, there, he was planning, that was a start. He told himself, *You have to do it, you know, or those butchers will get away, you have to kill yourself*

NO. He didn't want to die. He was afraid of death. What if there wasn't anything after he was dead, what then? What would it be like then? No, he couldn't

You've got to do it. He began to taunt and shame himself. Are you going to let them get away to kill more little children? It's your fault those others are dead, are you going to let their killers get away alive, the killers of little children

No. All this outrage was gone. Only a mushiness in his chest remained. He had to try something else; he began to call him-

self names he had never been able to call himself before because he had been afraid that they were true; he lashed himself mercilessly, trying, trying to strike a spark somewhere, the spark of hate, the spark of duty, the spark of manhood—

Nothing worked. His fingers continued their automatic journeys across the control board, slowly working their small sabotages on the angles and the timings, small sabotages that would build up to one big sabotage that would make the last torp go hurtling past the enemy hull. He sank, his spirit was melting under his feet like an icecube in the sun and his boots were sinking in. He wasn't a man, he wasn't a captain, he wasn't anything, they had taken everything away from him, all the masks he had used to hide the truth of himself from himself, the truth of what he was—a *puling, crawling weakling!* He could no longer even despise himself. He was beneath his own contempt. He no longer wanted to live.

No longer wanted to live.

He felt around the thought carefully, testing it to see if it would spring shut on him and leave him paralyzed as all the others had. Finally he found he could jab openly at the thought and it stayed put. It was genuine. He didn't want to live. He had so lost respect for himself

that he wanted to be free of himself; and his only means of escape was death.

Those damned butchers had taken too much from him! The fools had so completely demolished the edifice of his ego that he could climb over the ruins without the ladder of courage!

He began to think (they can't control my thinking, damn them), how could he fool them, how could he do it quickly so that Jackson and Ross and Price wouldn't see it coming?

He wanted very much to be dead, so he thought of an idea quickly. He had to make them believe it was natural for him to talk to Weaver in the control room. To do that, he had to make *himself* believe it was natural for him to talk to Weaver in the control room, had to fool himself.

He never talked to Weaver in the control room during a run, it wasn't necessary for Stanley to communicate with the control room because he had complete control of the ship. But he often talked to Weaver other times. Weaver had once left a message in Stanley's office, "Must talk with you, urgent," and Stanley could not remember ever answering that message months ago. Weaver had something urgent to tell him, he had to find it out, hadtohadto he formed the *thought*

Pick the microphone up and talk to Weaver in the torpedo room.

His hand moved and lifted the slim cylinder of black metal and pressed it to his mouth. His lips said, "This is Captain Stanley, Weaver. Weaver?"

Increase volume.

His hand moved up. He thought of a false image of increasing volume. Someone shouted. One of Stanley's fingers slipped through the ring and pulled. The impact of the explosion pulverized his ribs and scooped the flesh from the hollow of his chest.

Jackson scrambled to his feet and yelled, "Take it, Price!" and he and Ross pulled what was left of Captain Stanley out of the control room.

"Sweet Heaven," said Jackson.

"What the hell—why—?" said Ross.

Both were stupefied. Ross said, "He picked it up and talked into it, just like he thought it was the mike, but what—what could have made him mistake a grenade for a microphone?"

Jackson said, "He was acting strange all today. He must have cracked up."

"I'll bet it was the kids."

There was a flash, and the blue-white, spitting flare that had been the enemy battleship swayed past a porthole.

THE END



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Speech Is Silver

By JOHN BRUNNER

They had stolen his face, his voice,
his wife.
Now they were going to steal himself.
To stop the theft,
must he kill the thief?

NONE of the company guards attempted to stop Jeremy Hankin as he walked towards the gleaming facade of the building across which was inscribed in huge letters the name of the Soundsleep Corporation. They recognized him, even without the makeup he was compelled to wear for the publicity pictures the company used, and knew that he could come here whenever he liked: a privilege granted by the doubtless very grateful company. After all, they owed him a great deal.

Since his wife left him, he had been coming here more and more often, seldom speaking to anyone—for the last several times, not talking at all—but merely wandering with a wistful expression from floor to floor, peering curiously in at the glass doors of the

offices, acknowledging the greetings of impressed junior staff, hearty executives and diffident clients with a uniform forced smile and a nod of the head.

Occasionally a bitter look came and went on his round, pale face, but it never lasted long enough for anyone to note its passage and start wondering.

The building covered an entire block, with three entrances. Over the past month he had formed the habit of leaving by a different door from that where he had entered. The company guards would not expect to see him again once he had vanished inside.

The uppermost four floors were Soundsleep's, the remainder rented. Very occasionally he had got out of the elevator at a lower level and stood looking at the names of other companies painted on

the opaque doors there; he had never summoned the courage to investigate further, though, and for him the building existed as a kind of three-dimensional chess-board perched on top of a column of vaguely luminous mist. In and out of this mist, impinging on his awareness when they shared an elevator with him or brushed past him in the lobby, were the other inhabitants of the building. He would look at them vaguely and wonder how many of them were customers of Soundsleep; and in particular, he would look at the young girl secretaries and wonder how many of them he spoke to every night—for how many of them he might be their publicly acknowledged bedfellow . . .

He took his usual elevator, the first of the four, and without apologizing for having to reach past another passenger pushed the button for the next to uppermost floor. The very top was where Soundsleep kept its most valuable commodity. On the three other floors the company used, there was little to mark the firm out from any other business corporation: small offices and large, more or less expensively furnished according to the status of the occupants, glass-partitioned or walled-in, equipped with phones of black or colored plastic and decorated with status-conjuring Klees and Matisses as well as dis-

creetly impressive graphs charting the growth of the venture from nothing, past the discontinuity of the Great Search, to the present fantastic peaks of success . . .

IT was Mary who got him involved, who stopped when he would have hurried by the street-corner booth and the urbane young man with the recorder, eyes bright with interest and the recognition of reality behind what might have been a mere publicity stunt. Then, the name on the flimsy portable booth meant little; one could see from the puzzled faces of the crowd around that the reason for the young man's repeated challenge was known to very few people as yet.

A trifle dismayed at seeing Mary's enthusiasm, yet gallantly falling in with her wishes—for he was very proud of his young and pretty wife, and their marriage was two years new—he stopped as she had done and took her hand.

"What is all this?" he murmured, scanning the gaudy sides of the booth for some explanatory poster and finding only cryptic advertising teasers.

"It's the Great Search," Mary answered. "I heard all about it on TV last night. It's the Soundsleep company."

Soundsleep . . . He turned

the name over, seeking a referent, and finally shrugged and gave her an inquiring smile.

"Oh, you must know!" Briefly, an expression of annoyance turned down the corners of her red ripe mouth, and he felt the inevitable heart-stopping stab of alarm which accompanied any falling short in his ability to live up to the image she had made of him. "They've only been able to service very rich people up till now, but they've got some new technique and they're going to make it available to everybody for practically nothing!"

He groped in memory. Associations still eluded him. He ventured at last, his eyes still on the urbane young man as he challenged passer-by after passer-by with his portable recorder, "Something to do with sleeping better. . . ?"

"Oh, Jerry!" Mary's eyes were fixed on the same target, and did not turn aside as she addressed him. "It's this thing where it tells you in your sleep all what to do and how to straighten out things that go wrong during the day!"

Click. Some ill-tempered objections raised, in print in a technical journal he had casually leafed through, by the vice-president of a company making psychotherapeutic chemicals: something about automated analysis—"Got it," he said aloud. "But

what's this about a Great Search?"

"They're looking for people with the right voices," Mary told him irritably. "A man and a woman who'll do all the recording. So then you just connect this gadget to your phone when you lie down for the night, and then it tells you to go to sleep so you don't lie awake worrying about things which went wrong earlier, and then it tells you—"

He didn't mean to interrupt; he never cared or dared to be rude to this marvellous girl who had married him for some reason he never could fathom. But he said then, "Yes, yes! I did hear about it. Shall we move on?"

It was probably the slight nervousness always induced by being in the center of a crowd which set him on edge, he realized—that, and the curious hungry intentness with which all eyes devoured the current subject of the urbane young man's attentions. He hated to be conspicuous, placed in the spotlight, and he knew that Mary wished he was vainer and stood out more from the mass, so she might quite well insist on him making a recording here.

Whatever they were being made to say, the men addressing the microphone weren't spending more than a minute each on it, and the urbane young man was already eying him with an

alert, thoughtful expression.

"No, you're going to enter," Mary said with determination. "You've got a nice voice. I've always told you that. In fact I think maybe it was more for your voice than anything else that I married you. Especially in the dark. When you talk to me after putting the light out, it makes me—"

"Mary, will you please stop that!" he whispered, feeling a hot red current in his cheeks and glancing around with a frantic prayer that no one should have overheard.

She giggled. "Well, it's true, isn't it? Which ought to make you a very good candidate for this job of talking to thousands of women in their bedrooms."

"Oh, please *stop* it!" He felt his blushes grow fiercer yet. Somehow he had never adapted to the honest standpoint—or so it was claimed to be—that something which everyone did could not be treated as completely private. Once in a while he wondered whether Mary talked about it with her women friends, but he hated even wondering and always shifted his mental gears with rigid self-control. "Anyway, it's probably just a publicity gimmick—they more than likely have the person lined up for the job already and when they unveil him it'll turn out to be the chairman's son."

"You're trying to get away, aren't you?" Mary murmured. "Well, I'm not going to let you. I'm very proud of that nice voice of yours, and I think you ought to go in for the competition."

"But—"

"Good gracious, Jerry! Anyone would think it cost money to enter and you were down to your last pennies! You don't even have to say very much—I saw it on TV, how they can take just two or three words and analyze the recording to say if this is a suitable voice or not."

And then the urbane young man was there between them, sharp-eyed, dark-clothed, holding his microphone almost like a gun and pointing at the victim Mary had trapped for him.

"This is my husband," Mary stated firmly. "I think he ought to go in for your competition."

"Anyone and everyone is welcome to enter," the urbane young man purred. Hankin drew himself together with a terrible effort; the damage was done now, the stare of the crowd was focused on him, and he could not compound the suffering by behaving like an idiot. He must do Mary credit in this predicament, at least.

Swallowing hard, he croaked at the urbane young man. "Uh—what do I have to say?"

"Anything you like, sir. To recite your name and address

would probably suffice, though if you wish to provide us with a longer sample for analysis we'd be obliged."

He took the shortest road to salvation and identified and located himself. Then he pushed aside the microphone, took Mary's hand and hurried away down the street.

HE shivered, and came abruptly back to awareness of the present. He was standing staring at the upward leap of the Sound-sleep Corporation's fortunes that followed the date of the Great Search on the grid of the graph before him. Nervous, he turned to see if anyone was watching him. There was someone: a pert, silvery-blond girl carrying a thick file of papers. She smiled as he looked her over.

"You're Mr. Hankin, aren't you? We've never actually met but of course I've seen you around lots of times. You must be terribly proud when you look at the chart and see what a difference your voice made to Sound-sleep!"

She paused as if expecting him to say something in that same famous voice, but he didn't speak. Disappointed, she went on, "I just want to tell you I think you're wonderful! I take the Soundsleep service myself—of course I get it at discount because I work here—and I'm sure

it's the voice that counts, really, not the things you say because any fairly sensible person could work those out. What makes the voice count is that it's kind of—well—*persuasive*, isn't it?"

He shrugged and nodded and smiled and turned back to his contemplation of the graph, hoping that when he looked again she would be gone.

She was. He strode rapidly along the carpeted corridor and came to a men's room. He listened for several seconds trying to determine whether it was empty; when he convinced himself it was, he slipped inside.

He went to the furthest of the toilet booths, bolted the door, and sat down on the lid of the toilet to wait.

WHEN the letter from Sound-sleep came, stating that he had been selected out of three-quarters of a million candidates to provide the voice in which would be recorded all the tapes to be used in the corporation's new mass-consumption service, he was appalled. By now it was known that the Great Search in itself had doubled the firm's client list, simply by publicizing its existence, and plans were afoot to launch the full-scale service with an hour-long TV spectacular and an exposure of the successful candidates to an audience estimated at fifty million.

"Do you mean you're not going to do it?" Mary demanded.

"Of course not!" he snapped. "Me, in front of all those people? Reporters banging on the door all day and night? Hysterical women whipped up by the publicity agents to swoon when I appear? Darling, you've seen how they tackle things like this nowadays!"

There was a long silence. Finally Mary said, "I don't think you have any guts."

He looked at her vacantly.

"No guts," she said again. "I decided to marry you because I thought you did have—some sort of drive, some sense of wanting to get on. I've watched you for over two years now, night and day. Daytime, you're satisfied to let things roll as they go—you don't take opportunities when they present themselves, you don't go looking for them when they don't. No guts. And what's true in the daytime is true at night as well."

He looked at her face as though they were strangers, and read there something yet more appalling than the contents of the letter from Soundsleep in his limp hand.

"But—but after people have been married for some time this kind of thing is bound to . . ." He checked the hollow words, for she was shaking her head with emphasis.

"Not 'bound to,'" she declared. "I've checked up with some of my girl friends. Kitty's been married almost eight years, and she says Horace is like a teenager."

"You mean you actually discuss matters like that with a woman like Kitty?" He was shaking so much he had to join his hands and try to control himself.

"Oh, darling!" At once she was all melting, coming to hug him around the waist and look up at him with wide eyes. "I only want to find out if I'm failing you in any way—if there's something I can do to *encourage* you . . . I'm sorry I made that dreadful crack about having no guts, but I'd have thought—I really would have thought—that when a chance like this occurred you'd want to jump at it."

So finally, afraid to lose her, he gave in.

IN those far-off days of five years ago, Soundsleep operated from two floors of an old building in a somewhat rundown area, but even then there was the vigorous sense of a go-ahead organization transforming the dusty, shabby setting. Three men talking obsessively among themselves greeted him and brought him into a conference room where three others were already assembled. They put him into a chair at the bottom end of the long table and themselves sat down, ceasing

to talk as though a switch had been pulled.

"This is Jeremy Hankin, the contest winner," said the oldest of the men who had escorted him in.

Silence occupied the next thirty-odd seconds. Then a red-haired man of about thirty, who had been in the room when Hankin arrived, spoke up.

"That face won't photograph very well. Too round and smooth. Have to add some contours. Restyling the hair will help a bit, I guess, but—"

"This profile isn't bad," interrupted a balding man on Hankin's other side. "It's the weight that worries me. Have to trim that waistline about four inches. They look for a lean type—traditional authoritarian ectomorph."

"I don't agree with the survey you're referring to," the redhead said. "Whichever way it goes, though, it's going to be tough. Mr. Welland, couldn't you have got us better material to work with?" He glanced at the man who had introduced Hankin.

"Don't be hard on Welland," the balding man objected. "A voice and a face don't necessarily tie up. And with the woman we've scored damned near a hundred per cent."

"Hundred per cent hell," said the redhead morosely.

"Like it or not, she just can't be a busty twenty-year-old!" the

balding man snapped. "Men won't take advice from an image like that. Got to be a woman of mature years, experienced, tolerant, not holding out the threat of permanent emotional ties, good for a weekend in bed but still better for inside information about the wiles of the enemy sex—"

Boiling up inside Hankin to this point had been a fearful sensation of inanimate existence, as though for these people he didn't count other than as merchandise. Now he found his tongue and croaked at them.

"What *is* all this? I thought it was my voice which concerned you, not my appearance!"

"Hm?" The redhead gave him a startled stare. "Oh, your voice? We have that already. We—"

"Just a second, Ted." Welland cut in with quiet authority. "I guess I should apologize for these guys' manners, Mr. Hankin. But you'll forgive them, I hope, when I show you just what it is they've been doing for the past eight solid years. Not to put too fine a point on it, you're the package rather than the goods."

"I—I don't understand," Hankin said feebly. Every now and then in his life he had come up against someone who made him feel totally inadequate; Welland breathed assurance and conscious power, and already, in these few minutes after their first meeting, Hankin was sure

he would never be able to stand up and tell him to go to hell.

"I'll try and make it plainer, then," Welland agreed with patronizing calmness. "You're familiar with our techniques, aren't you?"

"I guess so," Hankin muttered. "You start by hypnotizing your clients, leaving a post-hypnotic which sends them to sleep under standard conditions: bed, darkness and the signal from the phone attachment which you supply. They then report on anything which went wrong during the previous day, anything which embarrassed or upset them and might cause insomnia or brooding and depression. Uh—then the hypnotic trance makes them accept the advice which is offered to straighten things out . . ." He broke off.

"You understand it very well," Welland smiled. "But I sense that something still puzzles you."

"I admit it does," Hankin said. "I don't see how you can provide so much individual attention on an automatic service. Already you claim customers in the tens of thousands—you can't supply individual therapy to that many people."

"It isn't therapy except in the most general sense," Welland said. "What we're selling is in fact confidence. Assurance. Comfort. And—oh, we don't make any secret of it!—the way we do

this is the same as astrologers and others such have been using for centuries: carefully planned ambiguity. We choose for each client a standard program which she—or he, but eight out of ten are women—will continue to receive regardless of what's actually happened to upset her. We have some sixty-odd standard programs now, and are expanding. The contents of the program can be rationalized by the sleep-waking mind of the hearer and the following day the impression is left that excellent guidance has been given. But it's the subconscious mind, not the exterior influence, which leads to the solution of any difficulties."

HANKIN swallowed to ease the dryness in his throat. He said, "Well, but if you have a genuine neurotic, then—"

"Oh, we take pains to establish whether a new client is undergoing analysis or any other psychiatric treatment. We then request the approval of the therapist before enrolling her—I keep saying 'her', but I explained that. Usually it's given with enthusiasm, because we do offer unique assistance. And, of course, if the therapist wishes, we can arrange to have his specific instructions given to the subject in place of any or all of the standard program we choose for her."

Somehow Welland had given

him the impression that everything had been explained; anyone who had more questions must be of low intelligence. Embarrassed beyond description, Hankin said doggedly, "But if you're already in this position, I don't see why you had to go through all this trouble to find someone with a voice, especially since"—he glared at the redhead—"you have it already! I guess this must mean that the recording I was damnfool enough to make during your Great Search would be enough even if I was struck dumb this instant."

"Hmmm!" Welland put the tips of his fingers together and leaned back in his chair. "It'll take a few minutes to elucidate that, I'm afraid. What happened was this. We began to discover, quite early in the history of Soundsleep's service to the public, that certain apparently excellent standard programs were getting nil results. We traced this fault not to the substance but to the presentation of the material; we'd been using anyone and everyone to make up the tapes, but chiefly unemployed actors and actresses with good speech training. Some of the voices we'd picked on turned out to provoke subliminal hostility reactions in the clients, with consequent resistance to the words spoken. So we called together a team under Ted here—

Ted Mannion—and set them to work to evolve an optimum voice. And they did it. It's a beauty! In fact, our latest standard program uses it already."

"A—an *artificial* voice?" Hankin forced out.

"Surely, why not? We've had crude voders for almost half a century; we just had a greater incentive to perfect the device than other researchers in the field. By the way, when I say 'an' optimum voice, we have one for men too—a woman's voice, of course—but in that case we're still arguing, as you heard.

"I guess by now you want to know where you come in, Mr. Hankin," Welland went on. "Well, that's quite simple. We needed a far wider base of client support—that's fancy jargon for much more money—in order to pay for having all our standard programs remade using the artificial voice. It's expensive. So I dreamed up the idea of a nationwide search for the man and woman with the optimum voice. You happened to have it; when we analyzed your brief recording, despite the evident nervousness, we found an incredibly close match to the artificial optimum. Indeed, if you'd been a trained actor, or someone used to public speaking, we'd even have considered using your voice in fact as well as for official purposes."

"But you're not going to,"

Hankin muttered. Ever since he had agreed to yield to Mary's pleas and make this appointment, he had been steeling himself for the ordeal with the reassuring belief that he genuinely was going to be indispensable; that he genuinely was going to be the instrument whereby a great many insecure, anxious people were helped. Now in the twinkle of an eye that prop was removed from him.

Unconscious of the bomb he had planted under Hankin's precarious self-confidence, Welland gave a bright nod.

"That's right! All we ask of you, Mr. Hankin, is the sole right to use your name and identity in association with our optimum male voice. The actual demands made on you will be few—public and television appearances, where we'll keep your involvement to a reasonable minimum, photo sessions and so forth . . ." He waved an airy hand. "And for this, we'll pay twenty-five thousand a year for a guaranteed five years, with excellent prospects of renewal. What do you say?"

Hankin said nothing. That was the first shadow of what came after.

IT was during the rehearsals for the TV spectacular during which his name and face were to be put before the public that

Mary met Welland for the first time. He saw them talking together, and kept trying to see what had become of them from then on, but the irritable program director finally had to shout at him, and thereafter he concentrated on getting the business over with.

He hated it: every second of every minute of every hour. It wasn't even the money that kept him at it. It was the knowledge of how much store Mary set by the money.

And thinking of Mary, and what he could suddenly no longer do for her, made him more depressed than ever before in his life.

Perhaps it was as simple as it appeared; perhaps he had known that it was indeed his voice—mellow, quiet, rich-toned, musically inflected—which had attracted her to him, and his belief in this had sustained his physical capacity to satisfy her younger desires. Abruptly, his voice was no longer his; it was something concocted artificially by a group of computers, scaled to a grand average reaction-pattern mapped over a huge section of population.

He wished all this could be over, and his life could jell again into the unexciting but bearable form it had had until now.

But it didn't.

The TV spectacular was a tre-

mendous success. After it, there was a party which he had hoped to escape, for he seldom drank much and certainly now all he wanted was sleep. But for Mary's sake he endured it until past midnight, seeing that she was enjoying the attention so many half-tipsy men gave her. And she was looking very pretty, that was certain; she had gone shopping with the first advance against his fee, and come back with some exquisite gowns and a superb hairstyle.

At twelve-thirty he realized she wasn't there any longer, and neither was Welland.

AFTER the divorce—which wasn't followed by remarriage on either side, for Welland was bored and glossed it all over with a payment out of Soundsleep's by then astonishing profits—Hankin fell almost completely silent and into near-total apathy. He had more money than he knew what to do with, but if he went anywhere in public, so thorough had the publicity about him been that he could not have a minute to himself—columnists came to pump him for gossip, women came to confess to him that they heard his voice every night and usually also to try and tell him of their intimate problems, not being completely satisfied with reciting them to the impersonal microphone-like tele-

phone attachment which shared their pillows, and on at least two occasions frustrated husbands tried to pick fights with him under the impression that he had seduced away the affections of their wives.

He dropped out of sight for over a year. Not until the time came when they took over this city block and built on it the Soundsleep Corporation Building did he venture to return to the environment which had wounded him so deeply. Then, it was mere curiosity that drew him; he wondered what use they were making now of the resources he had put at their disposal.

On that first visit, he was lucky in not finding Welland there; he was off with some recent conquest, taking a short vacation in the Bahamas. Ted Mannion, however, had conceived a kind of pity for him bordering on affection, and with an odd mixture of gruffness and tenderness revealed to him the secrets of the web Soundsleep now spun across the entire continent.

Hankin watched in wonder as the gleaming silvery machines were displayed in turn: those which analyzed the reports on the clients and decided which of—now—well over a hundred standard programs best suited their condition; those which actually sent out the prepackaged reassurances; those which could

amend the standard programs to accord with special requests from psychiatrists who might have the clients in care—simple, these last, involving only a tape recorder and a hand mike and an elaborate system of cut-ins and filters.

"It's amazing what that voice of yours has done for us," Mannion said.

"Yours," Hankin contradicted. That had become the typical length of one of his utterances: a single word, preferably a monosyllable. The voice had been his, and now no longer was; he felt obscurely that it was wrong for him to use it.

Mannion shook his head. "No, without the reality of yourself to attach it to—without your pictures, your name, your TV appearances—it would just have been a good serviceable general-purpose voice. Having you to hang it on, people accept that it's the voice of a friend. Do you realize you have two hundred and seven thousand women friends?"

For a brief moment hope flickered in Hankin's mind. Then he turned away with an empty shrug. On the walls were pictures of the image-Hankin built up by the corporation; playing on looped-tape TV recorders in the lobby were cuts of the image-Hankin from the Soundsleep-sponsored shows in which they had compelled him to appear.

That's not me. "We'll have to add some contours."

Mannion hesitated. He said at last, "I think Welland a rotten, too. But he's got the drive. Without him, we'd be what we started out to be: an exclusive service for a few rich folks. I like it better handling clients by the scores of thousands."

As usual, Hankin said nothing. And finally, when the silence had stretched elastically, Mannion said, "You make me feel like a thief, standing there and not opening your mouth. Exactly as though I'd stolen your voice, damn it! But I wasn't to know it was *yours!*"

The words went arrow-straight to the heart of Hankin's suffering, and he realized with astonishment that here at least was one man with an insight into the problem he had to endure. He found himself able to speak, very briefly, but packing into the few seconds of release a whole disastrous world of meaning.

"I don't know why you had to have me, Mannion! You should have hired an actor, trained him up, put him on as a symbol—instead of taking me!"

WHICH, of course, they decided to do. Already, though the five guaranteed years were not yet up, there was another Jeremy Hankin in training: a

younger man, slightly thinner, whose face was close enough to the image-Hankin to be made over with a little trouble, and whose voice would never be his own but an elaborate facsimile of the Hankin voice, generated in an artificial voicebox concealed under his left armpit.

It was when he learned this that Hankin began to come back and back to walk around the four floors at the top of the Soundsleep building, to pry and listen and hope against hope for some means of re-connecting to reality. Everything seemed to have been drained out of his life by Soundsleep: his wife, his future plans for a family, his job—because it was neither possible nor necessary to continue working when he was a pensioner of the corporation. And now they wanted to buy his very identity, reassigning it to another man, a stranger who was not plagued by the loss of his voice because it wasn't his. It must be somewhere here; it must all be concealed in these four floors, most likely on the topmost, where the shining machines every night spun a web of Hankin-words into the minds of hundreds of thousands of borderline-neurotic women. Pretty or ugly, single or married, the voice swayed all their lives. Gave purpose to them.

So, logically, the lost purpose of his own life must be here, be-

ing milked and distributed to all those clients who nightly waited for his marvellous voice.

Five years, up tomorrow. They won't have told the company guards, they won't have told the pretty little silvery-blonde typist who gets the service at a discount because she works here . . . but Welland told me.

They proposed to invoke the clause in the original contract which forbade him to let or assign the use of the identity "Jeremy Hankin" and its voice to anyone else. And that included himself, the former owner. Five years passed, they wanted someone not plagued by these weaknesses and faults; they wanted someone who could be exploited to the full, without worrying whether his tongue was tied to-night. From tomorrow when the guaranteed five years ran out, they would pay him not for being Jeremy Hankin, but for being someone else. Anyone else. Pick a name and change to it for the rest of his life; pick a face and have it put on over the original.

Welland, damn you to hell. You stole my wife, and now you're stealing me . . .

THE time was seven o'clock. By now, he knew from previous visits, the premises would be deserted but for the bored duty technician on the top floor, reading a magazine and chewing

on a TV dinner while he waited for an emergency that never developed—before tonight. Hankin rose and unbolted the door of the toilet, then crept softly into the carpeted corridor.

In an office of which the door had been left ajar he found an Irish blackthorn walking-stick in a brass jug used as an umbrella-stand. He hefted it as he made his way up the stairs, not wanting to disturb the technician by running the elevator and having its soft hum betray him. The stick seemed ideal for his purpose, and was; the single violent blow to the temple sent the man sprawling, unconscious in a gathering pool of his own blood.

With unhesitating swiftness, Hankin moved around the huge bright hall from machine to machine, switching out every last one of the hundred-plus standard programs. Then he came to the specials—the ones where psychiatrists had applied for private recordings addressed to one single patient, and the corporation had supplied them, using the Hankin voice.

Hankin smiled. There were dossiers in connection with each of the specials, and the dossiers included photos. He leafed through them, stopping occasionally to read a juicy detail in case it should add to the fund of ideas he had brought with him. There were some two thousand

altogether, though, so he dared not spend very long on the job.

When he encountered the silvery-blond typist, about four hundred down from the head of the list, he put her dossier aside and made a note of its code number. Then he found some scissors and a tape-editor, and set to work.

By eleven o'clock, which he had set as his deadline—that being the likely time for most of the clients to go to bed and switch on their Soundsleep equipment—he had re-connected all the standard programs to a set of tape-loops recorded in his own voice. He had only had time to prepare about two dozen of these, but he had contrasted them as widely as he could.

They were in his own voice. That was what counted.

He tapped a switch and listened critically to the various orders he had recorded. "When you get up in the morning, don't put on your clothes. Go to the elevator and down to the street. Throw your arms around the first person you see and kiss him—or her—with passion . . . When you wake up, don't go to the bathroom. Go out on the street and do it there, in the gutter . . . When you wake up, don't cook the eggs for breakfast. Go to the window over the street and see if you can hit a policeman on the head with some

of them . . . When you wake up, get some kerosene and pour it on the bed, and put a match to it . . . When you wake up, go straight to the garage and get out the car. Drive it as fast as you can in reverse gear along the nearest one-way street . . . When you wake up, don't go feed the baby. Fill a glass with your milk and try and sell it on the sidewalk outside . . ."

He gave a satisfied nod and switched the machinery on. By noon tomorrow, Soundsleep Corporation would be totally destroyed.

He turned now, finally, to the last special which he had re-

tained from the total of two thousand-odd switched into his own new "standard programs", and recorded a tape for the benefit of the little silvery-blond girl. He said, in a perfectly matter-of-fact voice, "Get up right away, get dressed, come down to the Soundsleep Building and make love to me."

He connected the tape to the output circuit, and yawned, and went to tie up the technician, who was now stirring and moaning faintly, so that this night when he regained himself should not be spoiled by the man's meddling.

THE END

THE SHORES OF INFINITY

(Continued from page 40)

wouldn't go back to the star-kingdoms, either, for they'd hang me for certain when they found I was still living."

"They'll still hang you," said Hull.

"Will they?" Shorr Kan laughed. "Why, if I come back with a warning of the H'harn plans, the past will be forgotten. I'll be a hero, and you don't hang heroes. I gamble that I'll be on a throne again, in a year."

Hull Burrel appealed to Gordon. "Do we let him take advantage of the fact that we've given our word, to do this?"

Gordon answered thoughtfully. "We do Hull. Not just because of our word, but something else . . . he's right when he reminds us that this is our mission."

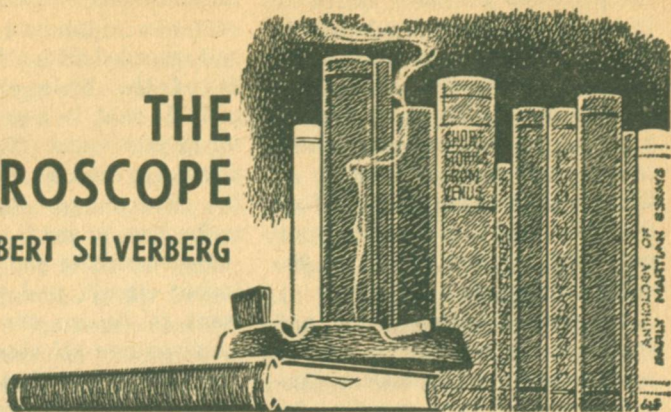
Hull Burrel uttered a loud curse. "You're a fool, John Gordon, but I'll go along with it. I've lived long enough anyway, so I might as well commit suicide going on an impossible mission with a damned fool and the biggest villain in the galaxy."

Shorr Kan clapped him heartily on the back. "That's the spirit! What is there in the universe that can stop brave hearts and loyal comrades?"

THE END

THE SPECTROSCOPE

By ROBERT SILVERBERG



The Dark Light-Years, by Brian Aldiss. Signet Books, 50¢. 128 pages.

This short novel is a satirical fable, and, since its approach is chiefly scatological, it may as well be called a Swiftian satiric fable. The coprophilous Dean Swift perhaps would have relished this book's concentration on excrement, but he might have wearied of its fangless bite and certainly would have disapproved of its loose, slipshod execution.

The problem Aldiss chooses to examine is a serious one: what constitutes an intelligent, civilized being? He loads the deck in a way that is perfectly legitimate for a writer of satiric fable, by having his Earthmen discover a race of rhinoceros-like alien beings whose way of life consists chiefly of wallowing in

dung. Revolting though their personal habits are, the beings are clearly of a high order of intelligence—and, in fact, are in many ways far superior to humanity.

Here we are, then, with our neatness and fastidiousness—and our blind cruelty. There *they* are, dung-wallowers, a race of unblemished moral virtues. The moral is an obvious one, and Aldiss rams it home in a bleak, pessimistic closing chapter.

But the book is carelessly written, weak in the joints. There is no real plot, merely a succession of incidents, which is not the same thing at all. The book lacks complexity. It is written, as most of Aldiss' recent fiction is, in a ghastly cute style that I think indicates simple contempt for the reader. A representative sample

is the coy line opening Chapter Seven: "The sun, as was its inalienable custom, went to bed at sunset." In places, Aldiss is marvelously funny, as in his description of warfare in the twenty-first century. Mostly, he's too busy thumbing his nose at his material to come to grips with its real implications.

Once upon a time Brian Aldiss wrote a brilliant, richly poetic novel called *Starship*. A few years later, he produced those exciting stories about a strangely altered future world that were published as *The Long Afternoon of Earth*. The present Brian Aldiss is doing little service to the man of the same name who created those memorable books.

The Penultimate Truth, by Philip K. Dick. Belmont Books, 50¢. 176 pages.

Philip K. Dick is a burly, bearded man who seems to operate on an all-or-nothing basis: either stories pour from him in torrents, or else he doesn't write at all. A couple of years ago he broke a silence of many years with his Hugo-winning *The Man in the High Castle*, and since then he's continued his triumphant return to science fiction with book after book in amazing profusion. This is, I think, his fourth novel in the past twelve months—or perhaps it's his fifth. And it's a good one, well up to

Dick's usual high standard of performance.

The year, despite the jacket copy, is 2025. Most of the world's population lives in "ant tanks" below the surface, having been shepherded there fifteen years before as atomic war threatened. A skeleton government remains on the surface, conducting the war with robot soldiers manufactured in the ant tanks, and periodically sending bulletins via television to the hordes below.

What the dwellers in the ant tanks do not know is that the war has been over for thirteen years. Two years of fierce atomic combat had left much of the world a wasteland, but the radiation has died down in most places, and the elite few who live above-ground have carved out fiefs for themselves covering enormous areas. They live in lonely majesty, surrounded by robot retainers, tormented by guilt even as they continue the deception being practiced on the people in the tanks. In short, a nightmarish situation, which Dick exploits to the fullest.

Deftly shuttling from character to character, he builds up an elaborate webwork of plot that generates its tension not only from the background situation but from the rivalry among the members of the surface elite. As in any Dick novel, the characters are vivid and real, the pace is

headlong, and the fine detail-work is executed with astonishing and unflagging inventiveness. The book shows signs of having been written at white heat, and this is both good and bad; the prose style is often clotted and lumpy, with fragmented sentences tumbling helter-skelter over one another, but there is a breathlessness about the writing that carries the reader along awesomely and irresistibly.

Recommended. This man is in the very top rank of today's science-fiction writers.

Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea, by Theodore Sturgeon. *Pyramid Books*, 50¢. 159 pages.

Here's a reissue of a 1961 clunker that bears the byline of one of science-fiction's all-time stars. The small type tells the wary reader that Sturgeon's work is "from the original screenplay by Irwin Allen and Charles Bennett," and it's strictly *caveat emptor* from there.

What this is is a novelized version of a so-called science-fiction movie about life in an atomic submarine. The movie, which was no great shakes, has by the usual process been converted into a television series, which is why *Pyramid* has come forth with a new printing. Though the series seems to be no great shakes either, and for all I know be gone

from the screen before this review appears, the book is intended to capitalize on the TV publicity by sending viewers to their local paperback emporium for a prose version.

I hope it sells and sells, and makes a mint in royalties for Ted Sturgeon, because he deserves any repayment he can get for his years of brilliant achievement. In a way his achievement is brilliant here, too, for he's taken a dreary movie script full of stock submarine-film characters, and managed to breathe enough of the Sturgeon magic into it to make it readable. It's a fascinating book to read, though not in the usual sense; what kept me turning pages was admiration for the dogged way Sturgeon managed to make something out of the sow's ear he was handed. There's life, vigor, excitement in the book—grafted over the dead bones of the screenplay. In the long run, it's just another submarine story. Sturgeon may well have produced the best movie novelization anyone has done, but it's still not a real Sturgeon story in any true fashion.

Sinister Barrier, by Eric Frank Russell. *Paperback Library*, 50¢. 176 pages.

A science fiction classic back in print again after more than a decade in limbo. This was the yarn that led off the first issue of

the legendary fantasy magazine *Unknown* in 1939; nine years after that it received hardcover permanence from Lloyd Arthur Eshbach's Fantasy Press, and in 1950 it was the first title in *Galaxy's* long-vanished paperback series. In all three of its incarnations it's now a rare item, so this Paperback Library reprint is triply welcome. What puzzles me is how such a famous book could have been allowed to languish in unavailability for so many years.

Time has been pretty kind to it. The theme wasn't new in 1939, and has subsequently been worked to death, but yet there's plenty of suspense and interest here. Russell begins with a series of strange and inexplicable events in the Fortean manner; before long the reader learns that the world of 2015 has been invaded by the Vitons, mysterious entities that look like glowing balls of fire; and from there to page 176 the intensity mounts unrelentingly. The Russell style is easy and colloquial, a no-frills-no-nonsense kind of storytelling that will never win him the Nobel Prize for Literature, but there's nothing slack or glib about the story itself. The scientific rationale of the alien invasion is impressively and unshirkingly developed, so that the book is that rarity, the thriller that is founded on genuine and stimulating speculation.

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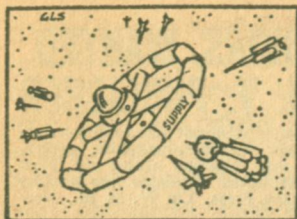
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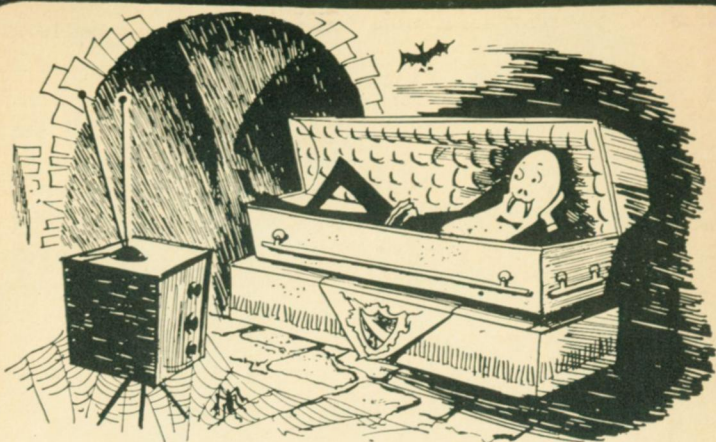
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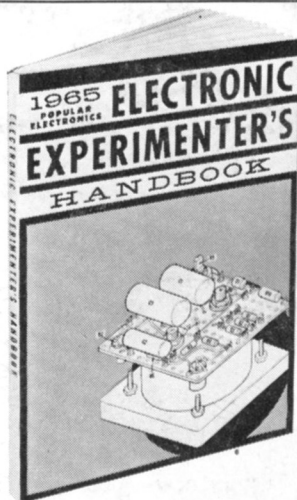
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